

The Holy Knight's Dark Road: Volume 1

Yusaku Sakaishi

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“I sure am!
What do
you think?
Aren’t they
cool?”

“Those rings
and necklaces,
all that jangling
nonsense...
Are you seriously
telling me they’re
all magic seals?”

The Holy Knight's DARK ROAD



Sain Forth

A young boy who has been recognized as the holy knight by the goddess who watches over the world. He is not only adept at light magic but is also a skilled warrior.

Melia

Sain's personal maid. She is an exceptional mage who has an aptitude for all forms of magic. At times, she might also show hints of jealousy toward the goddess who made Sain the holy knight.



Alicia Remia

Born into the Clan of Light, she suffers from a strange condition that causes all of her light magic to turn into fire magic. While struggling with this unique complex, she runs into Sain.

Sain Fostess

The fake persona Sain uses to hide his true identity from the world while striving—for reasons undisclosed—to become the dark knight. All the jangling accessories he wears are magical seals, which he apparently thinks are the epitome of cool...

Sain gestured to Melia with his eyes. In response, she pulled up her skirt, revealing the pattern of a dagger and shield on her thigh. Alicia observed the mark with a reverent expression.

“So this is a holy mark... Wait... How come it's... there?”



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Prologue

Will you be my knight?

He'd been five years old when he first heard those words. For such an old memory, it remained remarkably vivid: All of a sudden, the world had fallen away, bleached into whiteness. The next thing he knew, a beautiful woman was standing before him. She extended her hand to him and spoke those words he remembered so well. At the time, he knew very little about what knights were and what it meant to be one. Nevertheless, he nodded his head, because he saw in the woman's eyes a profound sadness. Not wishing to cause her any more sorrow, he said yes to her request.

A-Aah! Sain, dear! What do you think you're doing?!

A year had passed since the boy became a knight.

"Huh? Well, I'm fighting off monsters..."

Fighting off monsters?! Y-You're too young to be doing that! I think it'd be better if you, um, you know, waited until you're a little older!

"But the monsters are causing everyone a lot of trouble. Besides, I'm strong, so I have to do it."

Drawing upon the strength of a knight, the boy came to people's aid time and time again. Each time he used the power he received from the woman to help someone, his heart surged with pride. The woman, however, always worried about him—a lot. In fact, she probably worried about him more than his own mother did. This did not bother him though. He knew the woman to be warm and tender, and sheer kindness emanated from every word that passed her lips.

Sain, dear, what's that you're eating?

"Some sweets Mother made for me. Would you like to try one, miss?"

I... can't, so don't mind me. Just the thought is enough.

"I see. That's... too bad."

Three years had passed since the boy became a knight.

He learned he had become what was known as a holy knight and that the woman who had chosen him was a goddess. At first, he was shaken by the realization, but the shock soon passed. Had he not been picked, the boy would have likely continued to help people regardless, and whether or not the woman was a goddess probably would've made no difference to their relationship. So, he continued living as he always had.

The boy's earnest and good-natured personality became known throughout the kingdom. Soon, he found himself to be an object of admiration for all sorts of people. Loved by those around him, the boy's face never lacked for a smile, and neither did the goddess's as she looked upon his feats. Her eyes, however, held a hint of longing.

The nuance in her gaze did not escape the boy's notice.

Sain, dear, you really are terrific. You'll become the best holy knight there ever was.

"That's not true."

The goddess often lavished the boy with praise, but her words rang hollow in his heart. The reason he worked so tirelessly to save people, again and again, was because it brought the goddess joy. However, he realized his efforts would ultimately be in vain. No matter how many people he saved, it would never bring him closer to saving her.

One day, she came to the boy with a question.

Sain, dear, is there anything you want? You know, a wish of some kind?

"Not especially. What about you, goddess?"

Me? I... Hm, well...

After a long silence, the goddess continued.

I... I wish—

Her voice cracked a little as she spoke. Upon hearing her next words, the boy knew what he had to do.

Chapter 1: The Jet-Black Transfer Student

Daily Column: The Holy Knight's Prayer

Sir Sain was spotted a number of days ago in the Forth family's yard offering prayers to a flock of sheep. As our readers likely know, Sir Sain is the eldest son of the Forth family and, in all his greatness, is the one and only person in the world chosen to assume the role of the holy knight. The radiance he bears is the grace of the gods. The cross he shoulders is the symbol of justice. He, the holy knight, is the sole entity permitted to take the blessing of Her Holiness into his person. At the young age of twelve, Sir Sain has already demonstrated his incredible capabilities at last month's tournament—the Laura Grand Prix—during which he bested all of the competition and was crowned the strongest warrior in the kingdom. For many of our readers, his victory is likely still a fresh memory.

Sir Sain's prayers are well known for their soothing nature, but it appears these effects are not limited only to people. The sheep listening to Sir Sain's prayers lay themselves at his feet and, bathing in the rays of the sun, drifted off into peaceful slumber. (Picture 1: Sir Sain in prayer and sheep sleeping quietly.)

According to his personal attendant, who agreed to be interviewed, Sir Sain has lately been focused on looking after a number of plants and animals he'd taken under his care. Indeed, the loving grace of Sir Sain knows no bounds, touching not only man but all life across the land. He truly embodies what it means to be a knight—to be one chosen by the gods.

We citizens of the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge have always placed our faith in Her Holiness, Vicitaelia. To us, Sir Sain is no less than a national treasure. So long as he remains with us, the peace of our kingdom is all but guaranteed.

Our observation drew to a close when Sir Sain, having likely become aware of our presence, used magic to disappear. Seven years after taking up the mantle, Sir Sain has shown tremendous growth as a holy knight, but it seems his shy personality yet remains. (Picture 2: Sheep shocked by Sir Sain's disappearance.)

I clasp my hands together and pray. I pray that the holy knight, graced by divine favor, shall lead our kingdom to a better future.

“Gyeeeeeeeeeh!”

With an emphatic and very conspicuous screech, the young boy ripped the newspaper he held in two, paying no mind to the bewildered gazes of all the passengers around him. Few others on this ship sailing out from the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge looked anything like him. His black hair reached down past his eyebrows, slightly obscuring his blue eyes. Despite the sun beating mercilessly down on the deck of the ship, the young man was dressed in a set of very elaborate and very *black* clothes. On his fingers and around his neck were countless accessories, all of which had just a tad too many sharp points to be deemed reasonable attire.



Beside him stood a short girl whose appearance, while less inflammatory to the senses, was certainly unique in its own right. She shared the boy's black hair—a rarity in the region—but not his temperament; her expression was cool and aloof. Her clothes were intricate and frilly with white layered on navy. They complemented the silkiness of her shoulder-length hair, which shone with the luster of diligent care. To knowing eyes, her attire simply screamed “maid uniform.”

“I was *sacrificing* those sheep, damn it!”

“Yes, of course you were, Master Sain.” Her words were drawn out and her tone quite blatantly disinterested—the same apathetic drawl she always spoke with.

“Auuuuuugh! Oh my god the goosebumps! Make them stop!” wailed the young boy, Sain, as he threw aside the newspaper and flailed his arms—pointy silver trinkets and all—wildly through the air.

The young girl beside him who served as his attendant, Melia, responded with cool indifference:

“Not to mention it ended up being a total failure.”

“Hnnnngh. It wasn't a total failure. I almost got it. I was *this* close to having a great demon appear before me.”

“‘This close’? Really?” she asked in her distinctive drawl. “You know, the spell was supposed to turn sheep into demons, and yet you somehow managed to make it turn *you* into a sheep. How did you even do that?”

“Don't ask me! You think I don't want to know? I did everything perfectly!”

“You know how long it took me to find you? Actually, this second picture here...” said Melia as she picked up a fragment of the discarded newspaper. “Isn't this you, Master Sain? Except, like, sheepified?”

“Waaaaaaah! Gimme that!” shrieked Sain as he grabbed the fragment and tore it to shreds, punctuating each of his ripping motions with an emphatic *damn you!* “Ugh, and just when I'm starting a new chapter of my life too... This had better not be some sort of terrible foreshadowing!”

At this point, Sain noticed something. Rather, he noticed a lack of something. The surrounding passengers had all disappeared. More precisely, they had excused themselves from his presence the way one does when the rolling waves exert their influence on a nearby passenger's stomach. Now, they stood far away, casting reproachful glances in his direction. In an effort to switch up the awkward atmosphere, he coughed a forceful *ahem* and, looking out into the waters, said, “Whatever. This is the last I'll see of these days. Goodbye

and good riddance.”

A flat horizon lay between the sky and sea. Somewhere beyond that line was the continent they were headed for. Sain walked across the deck, his eyes fixed firmly on that invisible land in the distance. Slowly, his nerves calmed and he felt his breathing settle.

“Thinking back on it, it’s been a long, hard road... But finally! I’ve succeeded in persuading Father!”

“Incoming flashback,” announced Melia.

He had no idea what Melia was talking about, but in any case, he revisited his memories of last week.

Sain Forth came from a relatively conservative family. The Forths had apparently once been a part of the upper class, but presently stood humbly—and rather undoubtedly—in the middle class.

It was said the first head of the Forth family had been on good terms with the king at the time. Though there were no records of the first Forth having contributed in any way to state affairs, vestiges of the political and social ties formed then remained to this day. Even after their decline, the family still had plenty of connections.

The first Forth eschewed the burdens of title and office, choosing to live as far from power as possible, but having good rapport with the king naturally brought many others of the upper class to their door. As a result, they remained nobility for many generations after. They had now finally managed to settle into a quieter life, but every so often, they would receive requests hoping to make use of their connections of old. In some circles, they were affectionately known as the “landless nobles.”

As the eldest and only child of the Forths, Sain was their next heir. Succeeding the family involved a number of steps that would allow the heir to inherit the political and social ties of the current head. After turning twelve, Sain would normally not be allowed to stay in another kingdom for an extended period of time.

Sain, however, had a dream, and it was a dream that could not be realized in his homeland. So, he went to talk with his father. Standing before his study, Sain knocked on the door and steeled himself. He would do anything to fulfill his wish. He had made up his mind.

“Oh, good heavens, Sain! What a dauntless and intrepid spirit you are!” his father exclaimed as he entered. “You’ve received the power of the holy knight—a power that every living soul in this world yearns for—and yet you do not rest on your laurels. No, far from it. Instead, you seek to challenge yourself further! What aspiration! What ambition! Oh, you make me proud, boy!”

His father beamed at him from ear to ear.

“Father,” Sain interjected in an attempt to end his speech. It didn’t work, though. His father kept going.

“Thinking back on it, you were always a modest boy, Sain. No matter how much praise you received, how many victories you claimed, you never stopped training. Even after becoming the holy knight, your burning desire to grow never dwindled. And now, I see that the next step in your journey of self-improvement shall take you to foreign lands!”

“Father, I haven’t said anything yet.”

“And you shan’t, for there is no need! I fully understand! You’re planning an extended stay in another land because you wish to broaden your horizons! To learn that which you cannot in our kingdom! Am I wrong? Of course not! The sheer heights to which you aspire, oh it humbles even your dear father! Go on! Worry not about the Forth family! I shall hold the fort here!”

“Father, I think the heights to which I aspire might be a little different from what you’re imagining.”

It was, in fact, rather well known that Sain and his father had a serious communication issue.

“And your destination is... Why, if it isn’t the Kingdom of Loribania! You’re heading to the capital city of Raskas to attend the Jenifa Royal Magic Academy! I heard they run on the merit system there, and a great deal of students drop out before graduating! Oh, but that didn’t discourage you! In fact, that’s *why* you’re headed there! Truly, ambition incarnate! Still, I can’t help but feel just the slightest tinge of worry. Allow me to send some short words to the headmaster there! What’s that? Oh, don’t fret, boy! The old man and I are acquaintances of old! He’ll surely do you a favor! Rejoice, Sain, and set your mind at ease! Your graduation has been guaranteed!”

“Father, please stop,” urged Sain. “If you do that, my school life will be over before it’s even begun.” He didn’t even want to imagine how his schoolmates would see him under that kind of special treatment. “Wait, first of all, how do you know where I’m going? That’s what I came here to tell you.”

“Melia told me.”

“...She needs to mind her own business.”

On his father’s desk was the ticket to Loribania Sain had ordered, as well as documents about the academy. As always, her preparations were impeccable. But still, this was definitely not her business. Had he not visited his father today, the headmaster would likely be reading some very ill-advised words in the coming days.

And so, Sain departed his homeland, the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge. His journey would take him over land and sea.

And that was about it. Not much happened. In all honesty, it was a painfully eventless journey. The sheer dullness of the final sequence caused Sain to grimace as his trip down memory lane drew to a close.

“Flashback complete,” Melia announced, again to no one in particular.

“What in the world are you going on about?” asked a bewildered Sain.

In truth, Sain was hoping for something more dramatic—something in the vein of a furious and impassioned confrontation of words, at the end of which he would finally wring victory from the begrudging lips of his father. Reality, however, delivered almost the polar opposite. As a result, he was left somewhat wanting as he set off on his journey.

“In any case, a new path has been paved before me.” He laughed with the exaggerated articulation of a stage actor. “Out there lies a new world. Tremble with fear, unwitting denizens of lands yet unknown, for the day my ambition is realized draws near!”

He turned with dramatic flair, allowing his black coat to billow in the wind.

“I, Sain Forth...” Pausing for effect, he extended his left hand outward and brought his right across his face. “...shall become a dark knight!”

His statement, theatrics notwithstanding, was not so much an announcement as a reminder of his commitment. The dark knight, much like the holy knight, was unique in being an individual granted divine favor.

They were binary; a pair equal but also counter to each other. While the holy knight received their blessing from the goddess, the dark knight’s came from her male god counterpart. The holy knight commanded the power of light, and the dark knight the power of darkness. Sain admired the dark knight to no end, so much so that he longed to become one. As he gazed out across the endless sea, he took a moment to bask in the trailing silence of his masterfully delivered proclamation. At his side, Melia rolled her eyes.

“That’s definitely not the kind of thing I should be hearing from someone whose favorite hobby is gardening.”

“What’s wrong with gardening?!”

For the record, he was particularly into fruits at the moment.

+ + +

Having arrived at the Kingdom of Loribania’s port city, Sain immediately began preparations for their journey to the capital city of Raskas. The passage was a relatively short one, and this close proximity had enabled the bustling port city to blossom into one of the largest traffic hubs in the known world.

Carts were the standard method of transportation but, in addition to the usual horse-drawn carriages, the city employed an assortment

of monsters as beasts of burden, some even going as far as to use dragons. From here, people would select their preferred vehicle and depart for their destination.

"It's still pretty early... What's our schedule for the day looking like?"

"The only event that must be attended would be the academy's proficiency assessment in the afternoon. Aside from that, I would recommend dealing with the headmaster's request at some point in the day."

"Hm. Well, it's a little early, but I suppose we'll go pick up the monster cart we reserved."

The academy's entrance ceremony was tomorrow. Today, it was conducting something called a proficiency assessment. Based on their results, students would be divided into classes. The assessment would proceed through a test of magical skill, a test of physical skill, and then an interview.

Sain and Melia made their way to the cart rental store and approached the counter where the owner sat.

"Excuse me, we have a reservation for a monster cart."

The owner, a slim-looking man, widened his eyes at Sain's bizarre appearance, but soon recomposed himself and reached behind the counter to take out what looked like a reservation list.

"All right. What's your name?"

"I'm Sain, and this is Meli— Ahem." He caught himself before saying his attendant's name.

"I'm Melia," she said, finishing his sentence without missing a beat.

As the owner flipped through his list to confirm, Melia turned to Sain with eyes that faintly glistened with tears. She leaned onto the balls of her feet to whisper in his ear.

"Master Sain, that was a rather close call."

"R-Right. My apologies, *my maid*."

The excitement of taking this first step toward his dream seemed to have made him let his guard down a little.

"All right, could you go wait at the entrance? I'll bring your cart around right away. By the way... That's one heck of a get-up, huh? Got a real, you know, deviant vibe going on there. Thought I'd have to call the authorities when I first saw you."

"D-D-Deviant?! B-B-But—" Sain fumbled over his words as he tried to compose an appropriate response, eventually deciding on: "Hmph, I see you do not understand the appeal of the ominous aura that exudes from this outfit. Hapless mortal, you fill my heart with pity." He then laughed ominously. For good measure.

"Self-pity, right? Especially considering you were up all night

making that coat.”

“Maid! You did *not* need to say that!” protested Sain, trying very hard to ignore the sensation welling up in his throat that felt suspiciously like an urge to cry.

After thanking the owner, they didn’t need to wait long before a monster cart appeared at the store’s entrance. Pulling the cart was a massive wolf-like creature. With legs far stronger than those of horses, it could traverse even bad roads with relative ease. Not needing to select cart-friendly paths also allowed it to reach its destination in less time.

“Master Sain, just to confirm... Have you finished your preparations for the proficiency assessment?”

Melia’s voice rang out over the thumping of the monster’s steps and the squeaking of the cart.

“Preparations? Ah, you mean the magic seals?”

“Yes, I do.”

“They’re right here.” He turned to her with his arms wide open, showing off the entirety of his outfit. “I’m wearing them right now. Might have went a little overboard, I’ve got to admit.”

“...Oh, please no.” Melia stared at him, momentarily at a loss for words. “Seriously? Those rings and necklaces, all that jangling nonsense... Are you seriously telling me they’re all magic seals?”

“I sure am! What do you think? Aren’t they cool?”

“U-Um, okay... Let’s assume they’re cool—which is a very big assumption, mind you. Even then, is it really a good idea to be wearing them so openly?”

“No need to worry. These were all specially made based on my own original designs. I doubt anyone would realize they’re seals just by looking at them. Plus, they’re made to last.”

Though Melia’s brows remained furrowed at his reasoning, the childlike pride with which her master flaunted his accessories eventually convinced her to let the matter pass.

“Now that I think about it, Master Sain... Under the current circumstances, aren’t you... Hm, what’s the word? Completely useless?”

“...You know, that’s a pretty hurtful question.”

“Jenifa Royal Magic Academy is famous for its competitive merit-based system, after all. At a place like that, you’ll run into trouble sooner or later. Are you sure you’ll be able to handle a dangerous situation with all those magic seals dangling off of you?”

“Hm, you raise a valid point.”

Since time immemorial, humans had relied on the power of magic to construct and maintain their civilizations. It was a useful skill that not only improved the quality of people’s lives, but could also be

employed as a weapon to fight against monsters. It went without saying, then, that such power could prove very dangerous if misused.

This was even more of a concern for the academy, as it would be teaching its students magic. There was no shortage of incidents involving overeager children recklessly flaunting their newfound power and causing all sorts of trouble. As society's mastery over magic improved, crimes involving magic also increased. In turn, magic became a necessity in apprehending those criminals. Neutralizing threats posed by monsters and maintaining public security all but required the use magic, and for students who wished to take up jobs in those fields, duels involving magic were fairly commonplace.

"However, prepare to be stunned... because I have already accounted for that problem! I have, at long last, learned a dark magic spell!"

"No way. Not believing it until I see it."

"Muahaha! I thought you'd say that. In that case, see for yourself and witness the truth of my words," Sain declared in a supremely confident tone. "Watch and be amazed! *Darku!*"

Black particles began to gather in his palm. The mass slowly grew in size, beginning to pulse with dark energy. Its form elongated, and then suddenly launched from his hand as a bolt of pure darkness.

Or, it would have, had it not immediately scattered into a fine mist.

"What?!"

"Wow, I sure am amazed. You made that thing vanish. It was, like, *magic*," sneered Melia, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Also, isn't 'Darku' beginner-level magic?"

"Th-That didn't count! I just wasn't warmed up! Trust me on this! Even I can at least cast beginner-level magic."

"Hmm. How often can you pull it off?"

"...M-Maybe six times out of ten?"

"...You know you're going to be the butt of every joke at the academy like this, right? Oh, the bullying is going to be *epic*."

"Auuuugh! Don't say that! I'm already a little nervous about it..."

"Need I remind you you're enrolling in the academy's intermediate division? Just so you know, failing to use beginner magic puts you at sub-junior division level."

"Gyeeeeeeeeeh!" Sain let out an embarrassing screech as he covered his ears. "I'm not listening! I can't hear you!"

Startled by the noise, their driver turned around to look at them. Sain ignored him, pretending nothing had happened. The sting of Melia's words, however, had left its mark.

"Hey, uh, I'm not going to be bullied, right? Tell me I'm not going to be bullied."

“Oh what wonderful weather it is today.”

“Damn it, maid!”

+ + +

Sain and Melia paid the driver and watched as he rode off in his monster cart. Then, they turned around to regard the enormous building in front of them.

“This is at least twice as big as our mansion back home.”

“Ours is better kept, though. Their cleaning people missed a window over there.”

Same building, two different viewpoints. One was decidedly more scrutinizing than the other.

As the largest learning facility in the kingdom, the Jenifa Royal Magic Academy was situated in the center of the capital city. The chalk-white walls of the school building were reminiscent of a castle, and its grounds exuded the air of a noble’s private garden.

But the grounds exuded more than just an aura of regality.

Elsewhere, dilapidated dormitories stood surrounded by barren land, further punctuated by shady-looking storehouses no reasonable student would want to enter. The clear budget gap between the buildings was likely due to the differing treatment of their students; weaker students were apparently pushed to the fringes.

“This is certainly the first time I’ve seen such a large institute of learning.”

“The one in Lightridge was more like a church than a school, after all. Not to mention most of its lessons were about missionary work, so you were just on the road all day going from place to place. On top of that, you were a member of the Knight’s Order... This might be the first time you settle down in one place for a while.”

“Indeed. But don’t forget, my maid. The reason I’ve come to this institute of learning is definitely not for rest or relaxation... I’ve finally done it. I’ve escaped that kingdom. And now, my soul, oh, how it hungers! It must feed on darkness... The darkness that I shall claim with my own two hands...”

“Yes, yes, of course you will.”

As the two traded idle banter, they passed through the main gate and onto the school grounds, which were already bustling with students. Some were holding paper bags packed with textbooks and looked to be already on their way back home.

“It looks like the proficiency assessment is already underway.”

“The assessment can wait. We’ve got all day to do it, after all. Let’s go deal with the headmaster’s request first.”

“Understood.”

“That headmaster, though...” There was a less than subtle trace of

annoyance in his voice. "Classes haven't even started and he already has a job lined up for us."

"He is pulling a lot of strings for us in return, so let's keep the whining to a minimum and make sure we do a good job."

The headmaster knew who he really was, and Sain's true identity was far too prominent to be concealed with something like a simple gag order. That was why Sain needed his cooperation. The headmaster would try his best to keep his "holy knight" identity a secret and, in exchange, Sain would do his best to fulfill any requests the headmaster asked of him.

He had no qualms about this arrangement, but with the proficiency assessment happening today and the entrance ceremonies tomorrow, there were plenty of students roaming the premises. He would have to be extra careful while he worked.

"Is this it?"

"It certainly seems so. The place looks exactly as described."

Passing through a rather stately-looking door, the two came to a large spherical room. It was hard to tell what the room was used for based on appearance alone, but its unique aesthetic suggested it definitely had some purpose.

The ceiling glowed with a mysterious light, much like sunbeams streaming through a canopy. The ground was covered with soft soil, from which grew a short layer of grass. In the center of the room were flowers of all shapes and colors, and beside them were a number of small rocks and a pond. Were it not for the surrounding white walls, it would be easy to forget this place was indoors. That, and the obvious lack of wind.

Having taken in the surroundings, Sain made his way toward the grand pillar erected in the center of the room, which stretched all the way to the ceiling. It was, he thought, shaped very similarly to a staff—the kind used by mages.

"Hm, looks like the barrier's main effect is to ward off intruders and defend against physical and magical threats. I heard it took the combined efforts of ten renowned mages of light to create this, and it shows. The quality is excellent. Granted, I *am* seeing some cracks here and there. I guess we'll do a bit of a restoration job, too."

"Compared to our barrier, it's quite tiny."

"This one's made by people, after all. The one around the Forth residence was made with the power of a god. Which, I suppose, will also apply to this barrier pretty soon."

Upon placing a hand on the white column, Sain immediately reconsidered his prior opinion. It wasn't shaped like a staff. Rather, it *was* a staff. Staves were instruments of magic that served a variety of purposes, including being used as catalysts to amplify or sustain a

spell's effect. The one here allowed for the barrier around the academy to be sustained almost indefinitely.

"Begin the preparations, my maid."

"Okay."

At his command, Melia began placing small gems in a ring around the pillar. These were intended to restore and further strengthen the barrier.

Its purpose was to isolate the academy from the outside world and, to that end, it had to be large enough to cover the entire academy and strong enough to prevent any intruders from entering. But the term "strength" was actually rather vague and difficult to evaluate, as many aspects of a barrier could be said to contribute to its strength. Its physical durability was, of course, a factor, but so was its size and complexity. The one around the academy was fairly sophisticated, permitting entry only when presented with a student ID card along with the actual student it was registered to.

For the time being, Sain had only been asked to improve its physical durability. While there was a seemingly divine quality to the way barriers selected those permitted to enter, they were ultimately still man-made constructs, and could thus be destroyed by man, too. For this reason, it wasn't uncommon for a villain to occasionally appear and attempt to brute force their way through.

The simplest defense against physical destruction was to just make the barrier sturdier.

Sain focused his senses, allowing him to take in more information from his surroundings. Like most barriers, the academy's was made with light magic. It was the source of the holy aura that permeated the academy, making this particular room a ground zero of sorts. For Sain, the powerful waves of light magic saturating the space around him was agonizing.

"Ugh... I didn't cross the sea to be back in a place like this..." he muttered under his breath, his usual cheerful enthusiasm now replaced with the utmost displeasure.

"Now, now. This was literally your life until just a few days ago. Besides, there'll be less and less of this kind of work in the future, so think of this as your last hurrah." Melia gave him an oblique look as she steadily circled the pillar. "Of course, if a certain someone would just go full power, I wouldn't have to break my back putting all these gems on the ground, right, Master Sain?"

"R-Right... Um, sorry."

"Just kidding. I know how much trouble going full power causes. Especially for your hair."

Sain wore a small grin of appreciation. He pinched a lock between his fingers, making sure it was still the jet-black color he'd dyed it.

“I’m done,” Melia chimed, returning to his side.

Sain let out a quick, sharp breath, then released his power into the towering staff before him. A warm glow gradually enveloped the pillar as it was imbued with the blessing of the gods. Small particles of holy light scattered through the room like petals dancing in the wind.

“Careful... Careful now. Yeah, I need just the right amount of force — Wait, goddess, that’s too much! Ease off a little! Don’t distort the original shape. I need just the tiniest bit of— Eeeuugh!”

He seemed less like someone carefully discharging power than someone desperately struggling to hold it back. For a second, his entire being flashed gold—black coat included. His clothing quickly darkened again, but the gleam from his skin lingered as he attempted to contain the luminescence within him once more.

By the time he was finished, his face was beet red.

“...Phew. Done.”

After confirming the light had fully faded into the atmosphere, he moved his hand from the pillar.

“Nice job. I noticed you were struggling a little, though. Did something happen with Her Holiness?”

“Yeah, that woman... When she realized I was studying here, she tried to give the barrier her most powerful blessing. That’s how we got into a ton of trouble last time. Seems she hasn’t learned...”

Melia whistled provocatively.

“She loves you so much.”

“She’s overprotective. And it’s a problem. I can scrape my arm and she’ll freak out over it. When is she going to stop treating me like a kid...?”

Sain continued to grumble under his breath, but the slight upward curve of his lips betrayed his true feelings. The implication was not lost on Melia, who glared at him.

“...Liar.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She turned away, a sour look spread across her face, before returning to her usual drawl. “I said nothing.”

Before Sain could even voice his confusion, she spoke again.

“So, Master Sain, how exactly did you strengthen the barrier?”

“Well, I first applied an intermediate blessing. It might be a bit too strong but, whatever. It’s probably fine. Then, just in case, I put a holy beast on standby.”

“You sure didn’t hold back.”

“I just don’t want them calling me back over and over again. This should hold for a while.”

He figured it would last until they graduated at the very least.

“All right, we’re done here! Let’s get out of this place already!”

Sain announced, already making for the exit. He didn't want to stay in this offensively bright room any longer than he had to.

"Okay." Melia was already walking by his side, when—

"Don't move, you intruder!"

They turned to see a young girl. Her uniform suggested she was, like them, an intermediate division first-year. She had long blond hair that reached down to her waist, her striking facial features accentuated by her red, ruby-like eyes—eyes that were currently narrowed and wary, staring them down. Standing just a little taller than Melia, she had the kind of slender, flowing figure that tended to turn heads.

"...Intruder? Who are you talking about?"

"Who else?! You, Mister Man-in-Black!"

Sain froze for a moment, dumbstruck. Then, his eyes widened as he was hit by a sudden realization: So long as they were on the academy's premises, students were obligated to wear their uniforms. There had even been notices sent out to each student ahead of time to ensure the rule was followed.

And there he was, clad in a long black coat—the furthest thing from an academy uniform. Not to mention the countless accessories strewn across his torso, most of which were safety hazards even without their magical properties.

And then there was Melia, dressed in her usual attendant garb.

It was entirely understandable why they would be seen as intruders.

They were, of course, not intruders. This was a simple misunderstanding. Under any other circumstances, the reasonable course of action would have been to correct the girl and explain their situation...

However, she had made the fatal mistake of calling him "Mister Man-in-Black." The name struck a chord with Sain, and the next thing he knew, he was putting on his best evil mastermind impression.

"Mm-hm-hm, you've found me, little girl. But whether you can stop me remains to be—"

"Eat fire, you freak! *Flagus!*"

"Wait, I didn't—"

A bolt of fire shot toward him, forcibly ending his speech. An intense heat licked his shoulder as he just barely managed to dodge.

"I'm sorry! I was only joking! You're making a mistake!"

"Shut up and burn already!"

"Stop! Stop! This is a really bad time for this!"

As the girl threw more and more attacks in his direction, Sain began to panic.

"Seriously! Stop! Please! I just summoned a holy beast and it's still

—”

“Whatever! No one has time for your nonsense! *Orb of fire, purge with raging flames—Flare!*”



A miniature sun roared through the air, closing in on the two. ...And then tore into pieces, before vanishing completely into smoke.

“—Huh?”

“I warned you, damn it!”

The girl stood speechless, unable to process what had just happened. Before she could so much as gasp, the space between them immediately distorted. Sain recognized the very faint contour of an enormous lion.

It raised a paw above her, claws extended. Her unwitting gaze passed straight through the beast now towering over her, and yet her paling complexion suggested she could feel its cold, murderous intent.

“Stop! She’s not an enemy!” yelled Sain in a panic.

Seemingly indifferent to the scene unfolding before her, Melia leaned in close and whispered in her usual, apathetic tone:

“This way is faster. Hmph!”

“Ooomph!”

Sain caught a brief, pleasant fragrance before Melia drove her fist deep into his stomach with the force of ten raging bulls. The expression may have even been an understatement, as the entire room shook from the resounding impact.

He was thrown upward about three times his height before gravity could regain its hold, dragging him back toward the earth.

The sudden bout of violence had caught the attention of both the girl and the translucent lion.

“Excuse me, holy beast? You can leave now. I’ll handle the rest.” Melia scanned the room as she spoke, her lackadaisical voice easily projected across the room.

The translucent lion seemed to obey. It gradually vanished, the cleared distortion revealing a groaning Sain who had since impacted with the ground.

“G-Good work, my maid... You saved us... But was there no other way?”

“There certainly wasn’t. For the record, I did consider other options. I just decided this was the only one that would work.”

“I... I see. I’ll trust your judgment for now, then...”

Sain slowly rose to his feet, his arm across Melia’s shoulders for support.

“Don’t move.”

He looked up to see the girl, now even warier than before. Her eyes flitted between the two.

“We’re not done here. Who are you people?”

Before Sain could determine how to defuse the situation, Melia

had pulled his student card from his pocket and thrown it to her. She waited for the girl to catch it and take a look before speaking.

“As you can see, we’re students of this academy. That means we’re not intruders.”

“...Is this real?”

“Feel free to examine it. In fact, do whatever you want. Feel it, lick it, you can even snap it in two if that’ll make you feel better.”

“Damn it, maid! Just because it’s not your card... No snapping, okay? And preferably no licking, either.”

The scary thing about Melia was that he could never be quite sure if she was joking or not.

Fortunately, the girl didn’t take her literally. She merely placed the card in her palm and inspected it for a while. Eventually, her look grew more relaxed and she walked over to hand them back Sain’s card.

“It looks like you really aren’t intruders... I’m sorry for suspecting you. But it’s your fault too, you know? I mean, what’s with...” She gestured toward his clothes. “*This*? You know the rule, don’t you? Students have to be in uniform while on school grounds. Wear your uniform next time.”

“Ah, but I am.”

“...Excuse me?”

“This *is* my uniform. With some personal touch-ups, of course!” Sain’s exclamation dripped with pride as he flaunted his black coat.

At first, her expression was one of pure disbelief. But as she looked closer at his attire, realizing it did indeed retain certain elements of the uniform’s original design, it twisted into one of pure exasperation.

“Some personal touch-ups?! What do you mean, *some*?! There’s barely any uniform left! How is anybody supposed to tell you’re a student here?!”

“These hands of mine... Everything they touch is reborn in the likeness of doom and despair. I am the bestower of darkness. They call me... The Dark Resonator!”

“He’s the only one who calls himself that.”

His bizarre masquerade was promptly exposed by the short maid.

“Also, just so you know, we’ve received permission from the headmaster to wear the things that we’re wearing. In my case, I happen to be attendant to this—ahem—highly eccentric individual, so your understanding and sympathy would be greatly appreciated.”

“...Your outfit I can maybe understand, but are you really sure *he* got permission?”

“I’m... pretty sure he did.”

“...Okay, fine.” Some doubt lingered on her face, but the girl

seemed willing to accept their explanation—for now, at least. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen the two of you around here, so you can’t be junior division graduates. New students, then?”

“Yes. I’ll be a first-year in the intermediate division. My name is Sain.”

“Likewise. I’m his personal attendant, Melia.”

“I’m Alicia, and I’ll also be an intermediate division first-year. Let’s... pretend none of this happened and start off fresh. Nice to meet you.”

“It’s absolutely our pleasure, Miss Alicia.”

Unlike Melia, who had taken to the name immediately, Sain wore a look of open dissatisfaction.

“...Might I also ask for your last name? I’d prefer to use that.”

Alicia hesitated for a second. “Well, I’d prefer to be called by my first name.”

There was presumably good reason behind her insistence. While Sain had no intention of prying into the personal life of a girl he’d just met, complying with her request also posed certain difficulties. He took a few seconds to consider his options before settling on his usual theatrics.

“Mua-ha-ha! Inspiration strikes!” A deliberate smirk plastered across his face. “I have decided on your name!”

“What?”

“From this day forward, your name shall be Golden Princess!”

“G-Golden... Princess?”

“Correct!”

“O-Okay then. Do you mind telling me where you got that name from?”

“Because of your golden hair!”

“Such an uninspired answer... Oh well. I guess ‘princess’ doesn’t sound too bad. Isn’t the whole thing sort of long, though? It might be easier to say if you shorten it.”

“Miss Gold, then.”

“Huh?! Where’d the ‘princess’ go?!”

“And you may call me Mister Black,” he continued, completely ignoring Alicia’s complaint. “In fact, you might as well call me Mister Darkness... The jet-black gentleman, Mister Darkness... Ohh, I’m getting chills just saying it.”

Sain continued on his self-indulgent ramble for quite some time, grinning creepily from time to time. Melia remained at his side, observing his peculiar actions.

“...More like Mister Pretentiousness.”

“Hm? Did you say something, my maid?”

“Nothing at all.”

Sain raised an eyebrow at his assistant, who gazed back at him with wide, innocent eyes.

“By the way, why are the two of you here?” Alicia interjected. “This isn’t really the kind of place new students frequent.”

Sain and Melia exchanged glances.

“Well, uh, you see...”

“We still had some time before the proficiency assessment, so we went for a walk. Then, we just happened to find this room. It gave off a mysterious air, so we decided to take a look inside.”

While her master fumbled for words, Melia went ahead and put together an entire backstory on the spot. Unlike Sain, who was terrible at lying, the mask of indifference Melia usually wore made her particularly suited to lying with a straight face. Ethicality aside, she was doubtlessly a true master of the art.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, I know what you mean. I really like this place, too.” Alicia appeared to have taken Melia at her word. “You see that big column? Did you know it’s actually a staff? The whole barrier around the academy is sustained by that thing.”

“Is it now? Interesting.” Sain nodded along for the sake of propriety.

“Ah, look at the time. We’d better start heading to the proficiency assessment.” Alicia spoke very matter-of-factly as she checked her wristwatch.

Sain followed suit, digging around in his coat and producing an excessively ornamented silver pocket watch.

“Seems to me that we still have plenty of time.”

“Assessments for intermediate division first-years end at three in the afternoon. There’s only an hour left.”

“Huh. Is that so?”

“So much for showing up early to the assessment. I’m short on time now; I ran into intruders, and then they turned out to be students... What a terrible day it’s been.”

“...Shouldn’t you trust the academy’s security measures a little more, Miss Gold? The barrier’s sole purpose is warding off intruders, after all. On top of that, the staff itself is also protected by a powerful barrier. It seems rather unlikely the kind of scenario you were imagining would actually happen.”

“I’ve got some bad news for you, then. This barrier has been breached a couple of times in the past. If you’re going to be staying at this academy, you’ll learn eventually that there exist people in this world who are just on another level. And you can’t always tell by looks, either. Sometimes, they might look like a wimp, but then turn out to be really skilled. That’s why when I saw you, I figured I’d keep my guard up. Just in case.”

“I see... I'll keep that in mind. ...Hm? Wait a minute. Based on what you said... doesn't that mean you took me for a wimp?”

“Let's get moving. You don't want to be late as new students, do you? Come on, come on.”

“Hey, wait! Answer my question, damn it!”

Alicia dashed toward the exit with Sain at her heels, shouting after her.

“Curses. Why must I suffer this indignity...?”

“Aw, it's okay. Look on the bright side,” Melia consoled as she kept pace at his side. “At least people here won't be worshiping you like before.”

“...True.”

Melia's remark brought a small smile to his lips. As they passed through the exit, Alicia stopped, taking a few steps back.

“Huh, that's weird. I only just noticed, but... for some reason, the barrier feels stronger than before.”

Neither Sain nor Melia chose to comment on the matter.

The proficiency assessment was divided into three parts: A magical assessment, a physical assessment, and an interview. The first two could be done in either order. However, as its name suggested, the physical assessment was physically demanding, so most students opted to complete the magical assessment first.

As such, Sain, Melia, and Alicia all headed to the auditorium where the magical assessment was being conducted.

“Look at that crowd,” said Melia, marveling at the number of students gathered in the large hall. To make the gathering of almost a hundred students more manageable, they had been divided into several lines.

Back in the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge, blond was by far the most common hair color, followed by brown, and then white. Here, however, both hair and skin ran the whole gamut of the color spectrum.

“You know... That get-up of yours really does stick out like a sore thumb,” Alicia noted.

“That may be so, but alas, such is the fate of those who have fallen for the allure of darkness...”

His impassioned delivery earned him little more than a facepalm and a sigh.

“Hm? Miss Gold, do you know what that's used for?” Sain pointed to the long desk the students were lined up behind. On its surface sat a crystal ball the size of a human skull, which students took turns nervously placing their palms over.

“You mean the examination crystal? It changes color in response to magical energy. When you put your hand over it, it shows you your

magical genus and level of proficiency. Our academy uses a ranking system for the latter, with F being the lowest and A the highest. The average for those of us in the intermediate division is probably around rank D.”

Magical energy could be broken down into elements, with fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, light, and dark being the most commonly recognized. Magic was the process of using such energy to perform extraordinary feats, but each type of magic required its respective form of energy. In order to use fire magic, for example, one would need to channel the magical energy of fire.

Humans possessed varying aptitudes for these magical energies and were separated into one of three categories based on their expertise: Fivekind, lightkind, and darkkind. Those recognized as fivekind had a particular capacity for fire, water, earth, wind, and lightning energy. Similarly, those who were lightkind were better able to harness the magical energy of light, and those who were darkkind were more capable of using dark energy.

Having an aptitude for a particular energy made it easier to control. Basically, it was a knack of sorts; some people were just better in some areas than others.

“As for proficiency level, that’s determined by how brightly the crystal glows. Look, just like that.”

As one student placed his palm over the crystal, it radiated a deep blue. Another, more professional-looking individual, most likely a teacher, then examined the color and scribbled something down in a binder of paper. This was apparently how the process went.

“Am I correct in assuming your proficiency level refers to the maximum amount of magical energy you can handle at once?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Regardless of the element, no magical energy was actually generated or stored within a human’s body. Rather, energy was equally dispersed throughout the atmosphere. Humans could then use their will to transform these shapeless magical energies into concrete forms of magic.

Proficiency referred to the maximum amount of energy that could be converted at once, and a person’s genus described the magical elements for which this proficiency could be most easily improved.

“Wait, let me try again! Please! Just one more time!”

The desperate pleas of a student echoed through the auditorium as Sain and the two girls stepped in line. His assessment results had apparently been less than ideal.

The scene caused Sain to let out a haughty scoff.

“Such shameful behavior. If you want results, you have to put in the required effort. This is what happens when you slack off.”

Melia simply responded with a glare.

“Next, please!”

“My turn, then.”

Melia gave a short bow and toddled off, leaving Sain and Alicia to watch from the sidelines. Within seconds, a group had formed around the small maid. Judging from the fact that the vast majority of them were boys, it wasn't hard to determine that her natural beauty and exquisite appearance were the cause.

Peeking through the occasional gaps between the crowd, the two watched as Melia held her hand over the examination crystal. Immediately, a dazzling rainbow of colors spilled from its surface.

“No way... I can't believe it.”

The eyes of every onlooker—from Alicia to the gawking boys—widened in surprise. Sain, having seen this coming from a mile away, was the only one to remain unmoved.

“She's a fivekind... and every single element is showing such high proficiency levels... Hey, how come you never mentioned this? Is Melia actually really exceptional?”

“Indeed. She's my exceptional attendant.”

Fivekind were free to specialize in any of the five elements under their category. While that afforded them a wealth of choice, it also risked them becoming a jack-of-all-trades but master of none.

Melia, however, refused to fall into this trap. She'd considered the options laid out before her and decided: Why not master all of them?

As a result, Melia had become a mage of nigh omnipotence. She was the exact opposite of the old phrase: a master of all trades. After all, she *was* the personal attendant to Sain, icon of the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge. Mediocrity would not have sufficed.

“I'm back.”

She toddled back with her usual nonchalance.

“How was it, my maid?”

“My genus is fivekind. Fire and water are rank B, and earth, wind, and lightning are rank C.”

“Most impressive. You've made me one proud master.”

“You're most welcome.”

Sain boastfully puffed out his chest. Melia wasn't exactly a mask of indifference, either; she played with her hair, and her eyes began to wander.

“Looks like a good number of boys already have their eyes glued on you, too. Man, talk about a nostalgia trip... No matter where you go, my maid, you're always the object of everyone's affection...”

He thought back to their two acquaintances who, upon catching wind of their departure to Loribania, had made grand advances on Melia. Considering the scene that had just unfolded before him, Sain

came to the conclusion that beauty had no borders.

“So, Master Sain... Any thoughts on this matter?”

“Thoughts?”

“Let’s say that one of these boys... you know... tried to hit on me...”

Sain furrowed his brow. He had no idea what she meant. Every once in a while, Melia would ask these bizarre questions, and they puzzled him to no end. Gazing down on his short-statured attendant, he pushed his confusion aside and gave her his most honest answer:

“Don’t worry, you won’t hear a word from me. If you find someone you like, feel free to let me know. I won’t hold you back.”

“...Hah.” She responded with a curt laugh and shook her head. Then, looking him straight in the eyes, she muttered at a deliberately audible volume: “I hope you die a painful death.”

“Why?! That was a good thing I just said, wasn’t it?!”

He simply could not understand this girl.

“Next, please!”

Sain looked up to see the examiner addressing Alicia, who was directly ahead of him in line.

“What’s the matter, Miss Gold? You’re next.”

“...I suppose I am.” Her prior assertiveness was nowhere to be seen, having been replaced with a weak murmur. “I’d appreciate if you didn’t watch.”

With that, she walked up to the examination crystal.

Having just barely managed to hear what she’d said, Sain and Melia exchanged quick glances. When they had been in the room containing the barrier’s core, they’d witnessed Alicia’s fire magic. It was the kind of power that required great magical affinity to wield, suggesting she was likely a fivekind as well. While not quite Melia’s equal, her proficiency level was undoubtedly above average. Sain couldn’t begin to fathom why she’d want to hide that fact.

“Hm, it’s almost my turn. Maid, come and help me with the preparations.”

“Seriously? Do you really have to do this?”

“Absolutely. One must always look the part. It’s how I operate.”

Melia let out a deep sigh as she opened her bag. The two stepped away from the line and headed to a secluded area of the room to begin their preparations.

“Next, please!”

Sain quickly returned to his spot, raising a hand to catch the examiner’s attention.

Having completed her assessment, Alicia made her way back, her eyes weary as she scanned the room. Her brow pulled into a frown; she couldn’t see them anywhere.

And then a figure emerging from the crowd caught her attention. Her jaw dropped, and, for a few seconds, utter disbelief rooted her to the ground.

Sain paraded past her, the black coat of his custom-made uniform billowing ominously behind him. He wore an offensively great number of accessories on his fingers and around his neck, even donning a black helmet that obscured his face. Everything about him screamed “call the authorities.”



“Yo, who the hell is that? An intruder?”

“Can’t be a student...”

“I’m getting bad vibes.”

“This guy’s serious business...”

As the hushed comments of onlookers reached his ears, Sain couldn’t help but grin under his helmet. As a seasoned gardener, he’d had more than enough dexterity to give his uniform a sinister makeover.

“Black coat, black sword... No way. Is that the dark knight?” one student whispered as Sain dramatically threw back his coat. Rumor quickly spread through the room, causing him to attract even more attention than Melia had.

Just when it seemed as though the whole room’s eyes were focused on him, a black band appeared on his right arm, and he spoke in a low growl.

“No, the storm within me rages... Calm yourself, tendrils of darkness!”

The glowing band began to pulsate with the power of darkness, causing several people in the crowd to gasp. Sain gripped his right arm and groaned in agony, as though struggling to contain the malicious powers inside him from rushing out.

Melia’s attention, however, was focused on something else: The sound of heavy panting coming from beneath the helmet.

“...Is it just me, or is someone seriously running out of breath?”

Immediately, the noise stopped.

“Holding your breath now? Probably not a good idea, considering you already sound like you’re about to pass out.”

He couldn’t fool Melia.

“Wow. You’re really struggling to force out your energy, aren’t you?”

“N-No, I’m not! Th-This is totally involuntary! I swear, it’s just coming out on its— Hack! Augh!”

Sain’s desperate explanation was cut short by a violent fit of coughing brought on by oxygen deprivation in the midst of extreme fatigue. The dark pulses around his arm also vanished, his reveal now punctuated by no more than his own labored breathing as he stumbled over to the crystal ball.

“Teacher of unknown name... I have come to pit myself against your trial.” His theatrical line was muffled by his helmet.

“...Go ahead.”

The female teacher gave him a weird look, but ultimately nodded toward the crystal in a weary show of acknowledgment. She made no remark about his modified uniform; presumably, she’d already

received word from the headmaster.

Sain placed a hand over the crystal, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves.

“O great darkness within me... Heed my call and unleash your energy!”

As he exerted his strength, a small black spark no longer than his fingertip shot through the crystal with a *pop*. No one in the audience uttered a word; everyone seemed utterly dumbfounded. Sain remained silent as well, nervously awaiting the result of his assessment.

The teacher carefully scrutinized the crystal before speaking.

“Darkkind. Rank F.”

“...What?”

“I said, ‘rank F,’” the teacher repeated in a flat voice.

Sain froze, and a wave of commotion immediately spread through the onlookers.

As the exchanges became louder still, Sain began to laugh, shaking his whole body in the process.

“Mm-hm-hm... It seems I have suppressed too much of my power. Allow me to release some more. Just a little more and my true power shall—”

“Next, please!”

“Wait, hold on! Please! I’m begging you!”

“All right, come on now.”

Melia ambled over to Sain, who was doing the very thing he had declared shameful just moments ago. She bowed politely to the teacher, before grabbing his arm and dragging him from the auditorium.

+ + +

“...What?!”

Sain opened his eyes to see the academy’s sports field. A cloud of dust was carried by the wind, blowing through a number of students jogging on the track and causing them to squint.

“Ah... So it was all a dream.”

“It certainly wasn’t.” Melia was sitting beside him.

“No, it *was* a dream, damn it! It *had* to have been a dream! Just let me have this...!”

Sain held his head in his hands and groaned. After the three of them had been assigned their magic ranks, they moved on to the physical assessment.

Even Sain didn’t go as far as to modify his gym clothes, so he was currently wearing the same white t-shirt and navy blue shorts as the other students.

“Are you still moping about that?” Alicia asked, having just

finished her run. She dabbed the sweat from her forehead and looked down at him. "Come on. You're up next."

Sain slowly picked himself up and, without acknowledging Alicia in any particular way, shambled past her and toward the track. Melia followed closely by his side.

"Master Sain, shall I run with you?"

"...No. You may run at your own pace, my maid."

"All right, I'll head to the front then. See you soon."

Melia scurried off to join the front of the group. To Sain, it felt as though their relative positions on the track carried some kind of philosophical connotation. She was—and always had been—ahead of him, even before the race had started. When the examiner gave the signal, the students launched forward in unison. In no more than ten seconds, Sain had fallen behind the pack.

"See you soon." Melia repeated as she lapped him.

She seemed to be running further ahead of everyone else.

"See you soon."

She lapped him again. Sain looked on bitterly as her back moved further and further away, her strides quick and easy.

"See you soon."

"Do you have— a grudge against— me or something?!"

In the end, Melia had lapped him a total of four times before he finished. Further assessments followed, including tests of muscle endurance, explosive strength, jump height, and flexibility. They covered all aspects of physical ability and took over an hour to complete.

"Wow... You're seriously good at everything, aren't you?" The awe in Alicia's voice was unmistakable. Her comment was apt, too, as Melia's results were exceptional in almost every category.

"Now, now. Don't be so modest, Miss Alicia. You were pretty fast, too."

"I guess so. I mean, I *do* train on a daily basis. What was your rank?"

"D. I am, as you may have noticed, not exactly bulging with muscle."

"Ah, same here. It's a little frustrating that, in terms of pure strength, the boys will always have an advantage over us."

They continued to chat for a while, sharing their individual assessment results and discussing their general thoughts. It was, Sain thought, very student-like. It suited them well.

Then, Alicia turned to him.

"And you are... seriously *bad* at everything, aren't you?"

"...Leave me alone."

"What was your rank?"

“Prepare to be amazed... E.”

“...Please explain how I’m supposed to be amazed by that.”

“It’s not an F.”

“How does it not sadden you to say that?”

“...It does.”

Alicia’s expression was one of absolute pity. He slowly stood up and headed to the changing room. Once there, he took a quick shower and changed into his uniform before making his way to the final event of the day: The interview.

+ + +

“That’s one heck of a line,” said Alicia.

By the time they arrived, there was already a long line of students trailing from the entrance of the interview room.

The interview was conducted by the headmaster and deputy headmaster, along with the intermediate division’s student council president and vice president. Each student would take their turn sitting down with these four interviewers, with each interview lasting about five minutes. So, despite the long lineup outside, the turnover was surprisingly fast.

“Rank F? You’re joking, right? That’s, like, junior division level.”

News of Sain’s humiliating evaluation had spread like wildfire, and students were already whispering their own accounts of the incident into each other’s ears. As he stood at the center of their hushed commentaries, Sain desperately tried to keep a calm exterior. Meanwhile, Melia and Alicia acted as if they didn’t know him.

After some time, Melia was called for the interview. Sain pressed an ear against the door, but he couldn’t hear anything inside.

Eventually, she reappeared with the same nonchalance as when she had entered.

“So, my maid, what did they ask you in there?”

“Hm... It was mostly about my assessment. They wanted to know more about the results. Also, we had a short chat about my clothing. Apparently, there are a couple other personal attendants in this academy, and they all wear their work clothes everyday, too.”

Thinking back on it, Sain realized that, while he had attracted plenty of bewildered glances so far, Melia had received far fewer than he’d expected. It was an interesting topic to come up in an interview, but there was something far more pressing on his mind: They had asked about assessment results. He could already tell this was going to go badly.

“...All right. Here I go.”

He stepped through the doorway, trying his best to ignore the gnawing feeling in his stomach.

A single chair was positioned at the center of the room. This was in direct view of the four interviewers, who sat with their backs to the windows. From left to right sat the headmaster, the deputy headmaster, the student council president, and the student council vice president.

“Please be seated.”

The deputy headmaster spoke first. She was a brown-haired woman whose scrutinizing glare filled him with immediate despair. The corners of her eyes were touched by the very faint marks of aging.

Sain complied, sitting down without a word.

He traded a quick glance with the headmaster. His hair and beard were both a light gray, and he wore a white and navy coat. Officially, this was supposed to be their first time meeting; he made a mental note not to blow their cover and hoped the headmaster would do the same.

“Your name, please.”

“Sain Fostess.”

He gave a fake name. His family name was, of course, Forth.

Under normal circumstances, identity fraud was grounds for immediate expulsion. Sain, however, had received direct permission from the headmaster.

The deputy headmaster gave the paper in her hand a cursory glance.

“Magical assessment: Rank F. Physical assessment: Rank E. No intermediate division first-year has ever managed to achieve a rank of E or lower on both assessments, so congratulations, you’ve made history. Were you hoping for a prize? Or is this all some sort of elaborate joke?”

Seeing his deputy begin with the verbal equivalent of going for the jugular, the headmaster rushed to placate her.

“Now, now. There’s no need to be so, erm, *direct*.”

But the deputy headmaster showed no sign of letting up and continued to interrogate Sain.

“Honestly, what have you been doing up until now?”

Sain had no reply. The answer to her question was, of course, the very thing that he wished to keep hidden the most. He enrolled in this academy for a fresh start, and, in doing so, he’d chosen to erase his past.

But this also meant he had nothing to show. His past self didn’t—*couldn’t*—do anything for his future self. And so he kept his silence.

Eventually, the deputy headmaster sighed.

“I have nothing to say to a student like you. Headmaster, do you have any comments?”

“E-Erm, well, let’s see... You’ll, erm, probably face plenty of

challenges across your three years here, but I'm sure a student such as yourself will manage somehow. I look forward to seeing your accomplishments."

"You seem to have quite a lot of faith in him."

"Haah?! Faith? N-No, of course not. I have no such thing in the boy!"

She fixed the headmaster with a stare that seemed to question his very sanity. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat before hastily changing the topic.

"S-Say, what about you, Kain? Do you have any thoughts?"

The headmaster looked to the student council president, Kain, whose hair and eyes were both a golden yellow. He studied Sain carefully, a piercing quality to his gaze unlike that of any of the others in the room. It was cold. Unmoving. Almost predatory. Neither Sain's eccentric clothing nor the headmaster's exchange incited a reaction from him. He simply watched, as if such antics were all too familiar to him.

Then, he finally spoke.

"Jenifa Royal Magic Academy is unlike any other learning institute. As you know, this academy is committed to ensuring an open door policy; no student who arrives shall be turned away, and no student who leaves shall be questioned further. Our doors are open for anyone, so long as their tuition is paid."

Kain took a brief pause before continuing his thoughts.

"However... As a consequence, this academy is wholly focused on results. That's why we have both the highest number of new students *and* the highest number of pre-graduation student deaths in the kingdom. Are you sure you have the necessary resolve to graduate from this academy? If you are here simply to test your mettle or prove some point, I urge you to leave. Such people are often the first to die."

As the student council president had said, the academy did indeed observe an open door policy. With the exception of very special circumstances, it never refused entry to a student. It was, after all, even willing to comply with Sain's request to conceal his identity, a request that would have been out of the question at any other school.

In other words, it wasn't that Sain had chosen Jenifa Royal Magic Academy above the other academies in the kingdom; it was literally his only option.

Kain's direct question almost gave the impression he'd seen through Sain's façade.

"No problem." Sain could feel the pressure from the student president weighing down on him, but looked him in the eye as he answered nonetheless. "I have a dream, and this academy is merely one stop on my journey to fulfill it. You ask whether I have the resolve

to graduate? I think you're missing the point. Let me put it this way: Once I've learned everything I can here, I'll be gone before you know it."

Sain meant it. Having no other choice didn't mean he was unaware of Jenifa's reputation for harsh competition. That was why he actually held out some hope for the academy.

However, should it fail to meet his needs and its learning environment turn out to be a waste of time, he would not hesitate to drop out. His goal was his dream. Graduation was beside the point.

"Now aren't you a fascinating one..." Kain allowed the slightest hint of a smile. "Let me put your fears to rest, then. This academy is home to a multitude of challenges left to us by our predecessors. I don't know what your dream is, but you were right to come here. ...I expect great things from you. I hope you won't disappoint me."

His words sent a wave of emotion through the other three interviewers, in particular the student council vice president, who now sat with her mouth agape. Kain, for his part, was completely unmoved by the commotion.

"Emilia, any words from you?"

"No, nothing."

The vice president, Emilia, immediately composed herself, punctuating her response with a subtle shake of her head. Her long blue hair complemented her finely formed features, and she exuded a presence that showed she was in every way her president's equal.

They had each climbed to the top of this intensely competitive academy, occupying the first and second spots. While they were still students, they were definitely not to be underestimated.



And so Sain's interview came to a close, and he was ushered out of the room. As the door closed behind him, he let out a deep breath.

"Hey, you're done."

"Welcome back."

He was greeted by his two companions.

"So, how did it go?"

"I'm not sure. I thought I was answering their questions seriously, but... their response was pretty harsh."

"Huh... Geez, now you're making me scared, too."

It seemed there were indeed things that could scare the otherwise brazen Alicia.

"The headmasters are one thing, but the other two... As students, we're technically all equals, so they don't need to mince words. They're both really strict, too... What did they say to you?"

"Oh, the president had a question for me. Though, at the end, he did say he expected great things from me..."

"No way! You can't be serious. The president? *That* president? Said he was expecting great things from *you*?"

Alicia didn't even attempt to mask her surprise.

"Y-Yeah. He did. I mean, I don't know whether he meant it, but..."

"The president *always* means what he says. But, still, I can't believe this... That president... And you..."

"...Is it really that surprising?"

Alicia pursed her lips in a way that suggested the answer was complicated.

"That president... He's not human. Well, I mean, he is, but, like... He's so good at everything that he doesn't seem human. People call him a living legend. Be it in strength or smarts, he's miles ahead of everyone else. He could probably take on every single student in this academy at once and still walk away without a scratch."

"He's that strong?"

"He is. We've both been at this academy since our junior division years, and I've never seen him lose. At anything. Ever. He's smart, and his accomplishments as student council president are so highly regarded. The thing is, he's just so much better than all the other students that he's, like, hard to approach. And he doesn't try to approach anyone, either. Not unless it's for work. So he has this reputation for being cold and detached, like he's just not interested in anyone else... And now, you're telling me he told you he's expecting great things from you? Honestly, I'm still not sure I believe you. You could tell anyone else here who was with him in the junior division, and they'd be just as skeptical."

"I see. So, what you're saying is... Our president is a true

connoisseur of talent.” Sain broke out into a pompous grin, as though he were a dignitary who’d just been reminded of his importance. “He must have sensed my true power... Mm-hm-hm. Not bad. The man knows genius when he sees it.”

“...All right, ‘fess up. Are you exaggerating or just making this up entirely?”

“Hah! This is neither fiction nor exaggeration.”

Alicia continued to eye him with the utmost suspicion. But, eventually, her gaze drifted to her feet, and she whispered in a feeble voice:

“Must be nice to have people believe in you.”

And at that very moment, she was called for her interview.

“Here I go then.”

She approached the door with a heavy expression. Sain opened his mouth, but before he could find the right words, it had swung shut behind her.

“...Are you feeling a little down, Master Sain?” Melia spoke in a whisper that only he could hear.

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

“Well, I *have* been with you for a long time. Was it something they said during the interview?”

At Melia’s earnest urging, Sain began to confide to her a meandering stream of thoughts.

“They asked me what I’ve been doing up until now. And I had no answer. And... they’re right. What *have* I been doing all this time? I just kept relying on the blessing of the goddess. I never trained. I never *improved*... I mean, of course I’d flunk both assessments. What was I even expecting?”

“...You’ve been trying your best, though, right? You always have.”

“No, I haven’t. None of my skills were gained through hard work. I didn’t earn a single one of them.”

A tremendous amount of power had been bestowed upon him at a young age. As he continued to use it, however, its significance began to fade. It started to feel natural—*normal*—to have the power, and before he knew it, it no longer felt exceptional. Having taken this power for granted for so long, parting with it left him with an especially stark awareness of his own inadequacies.

As Sain sank deeper and deeper into self-loathing, Melia’s expression clouded with an emotion rarely seen from her—concern.

“Master Sain, I know you have this all planned out, but... are you really sure you want to go through with this? To live as a darkkind?”

“Yeah. It’s the best way to become a dark knight, so that’s what I’m going to do.”

Seeing her master’s stubborn insistence to follow the path he had

chosen, Melia reluctantly yielded.

“...As you wish, then.”

During the magical assessment, Sain had falsified his magical genus. The test was meant to be conducted with the examinees in their natural state; if someone were to consciously focus on a certain element during the process, it would distort the test and the result would show whatever element the person was thinking of.

Normally, nobody would do this, because faking their aptitude would only serve to cripple them. Sain, for example, would proceed through his curriculum as a darkkind. His classmates would receive an education befitting their aptitudes, while Sain would have to struggle with an element for which he had no natural gift. Motivated though he was, it wouldn't change the fact that he would learn at a far slower pace.

“On a different note, how did the conversation with the student council president *actually* go?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it would be a pretty big problem if he really was enough of a ‘*connoisseur*’ to sense your real power.”

“That's probably giving him too much credit. I don't know what that guy was thinking, but, as you can see, I'm currently covered in magical seals. There's simply no way he could have sensed the goddess's power...”

Sain inspected the ornaments he was wearing, starting from his neck and working his way down toward his fingers. When he reached the silver chain hanging from his belt, his eyes widened.

“...It's broken.”

One of the links had been damaged. A deep crease formed across his brow.

“Do you have any idea how it happened?”

“Not the slightest... This isn't good. I don't have any spares on me; I wasn't expecting one to break so fast.”

“Do I recall a certain someone claiming they're ‘made to last’?”

“Yeah, you do. And he meant it. ...What? Don't look at me like that. I checked them when we did the durability test, and they held up fine. This thing is solid... Well, it was, anyway.”

Its supposed durability aside, now that it was broken, he needed a replacement. Fortunately, it was the only one of his seals that was damaged. He figured he must have exerted himself a bit too much during the magical assessment, so, as long as he was careful, he shouldn't need to worry about it happening again.

While he was mulling over the situation, the door to the interview room opened and the headmaster stepped out. Alicia's interview didn't seem to be over, and yet the headmaster immediately approached

Sain.

“Sain, do you have a moment?”

“Sure... Good timing. I'd like to ask you for a favor as well.”

“Oh? Very well. Then let us take this someplace else.”

Sain followed the headmaster as he moved away from the other students.

“Isn't Alicia's interview still going on?”

“Ah, it'll be fine. They don't need me there. What I want to ask about, though... is the academy's barrier. Did you manage to finish up your work?”

“I did. As requested, I strengthened it for you.”

“Ah, wonderful. You never fail to impress, Sir Knight.”

“...Please, don't call me that. Right now, I'm just a student. Nothing more.”

“You ask the impossible... Normally, you would be of a far higher standing than me. It's not easy approaching your superior as a peer, you know? ...I thank you for strengthening the barrier. As promised, I shall hide your identity to the best of my ability. However, know that there are limits to concealment. Please keep your behavior within reasonable bounds.”

“Understood.”

“Now, I believe you wished to ask for a favor?”

“Yeah. One of my magical seals broke, and I'd like a replacement...”

“Hm. That's definitely an urgent matter... Consider it done. Would something similar to the others you're wearing suffice? One that blocks light energy?”

“Mmhm. That'll do.”

“All right. I'll send for it right away.”

Sain let out a sigh of relief. His magical seal issue seemed to be resolved.

“I must say, though... That outfit... While I did give you free reign over your clothing to facilitate your use of magical seals... don't you think this is a bit much? You're one heck of an attention magnet.”

“Really? I figured this was on the modest side...”

The headmaster rubbed his temples.

“...I'm the one who has to justify this to the teachers, you know?”

Then, he leaned in and whispered:

“In any case, I'll have the seal sent to your dormitory by the end of the day. Just hold out until then.”

With that, he returned to the interview room.

+ + +

The next morning, Sain awoke on his hard bed and stared at the

ceiling; the number of stains was a strangely pleasant reminder he had set foot in a new world. To shake off any lingering sleepiness, he leapt to his feet.

“...A no-show today, huh?” he murmured to himself, the tingle of dryness in his throat. He hadn’t had his usual dream, and, without it, the morning felt just a little bland.

He threw open the curtains to a sky just beginning to brighten. It was still early, but it was critical for Sain to get through his morning agenda.

First, he had to do his hair. It took some tinkering to get it to fall over one eye in a way that looked natural.

Then came the accessories. He followed a meticulous routine, going through each step carefully to ensure he hadn’t forgotten one. Rings and necklaces—absolute essentials. Ear piercings—slightly asymmetric designs to add flavor. Belt—custom-made with top and bottom straps that crossed over one another. Chains—draped around the hip for good measure. By the time he was done, he was jangling like a bag of coins.

Finally, he looked at his jet-black uniform hanging on the wall.

“Hm. I get chills every time. A true masterpiece.”

He walked over to the mirror and—*bam! Bam! Bam!*—struck a couple of quick poses to make sure his posing game was still on point. He then picked up a watering can by the sink and headed out to the balcony where a potted plant awaited him, flowers abloom.

He watered it.

“You adorable thing, you.”

Sain then finally exited his room, but not before he’d taken an unusually long moment to admire Jessica. Jessica was, of course, the name he’d given his potted plant. In his mind, it was a name that meant “the blue fruit of bliss.”

“Good morning, Master Sain.”

Outside his room, Melia was waiting in full maid garb.

“Mm, good morning.”

Not only were the dormitories in Jenifa Royal Magic Academy mixed, they were massive, holding two thousand junior division students and three thousand more intermediate and senior division students. Though there were a number of dormitory buildings students could be housed in, Sain and Melia had specifically requested to be assigned neighbouring rooms.

The morning sun gradually seeped in through the windows, painting the hallway a warm orange. Sain squinted as he peered outside, taking in the scenery.

“Hm, a good attempt, morning. However, as one who calls the darkness his home, we are like oil and water. Try as you might, we

shall never mix.”

“Ugh... It is way too early for this... I cannot deal...” Melia’s expression twisted with displeasure. “Did you have your usual talk with Her Holiness in your dreams?”

“No, actually. She didn’t show up this morning. It’s the first day of school, after all. Even she must have shown some restraint.”

“Aw, would you look at that. Her Holiness is learning to act more mature. She’s growing up.”

“Uhh, yeah... Except I’m not sure what to think about a goddess who makes humans feel like her parents...”

“That lady just loves you too much, Master Sain. There was so much love flowing through her that it spilled into her head and did something terrible to it.”

As the two made their way down the hall, the image of that woman occupied their thoughts.

Sain changed the topic.

“By the way, my maid, I’d just like to point out that you didn’t have to take the room next to mine.”

“You know what they say, better safe than sorry. You know, I actually asked them to assign me the *same* room as you, but...”

“Oh, come on. Now you’re just being mean. I can handle living in my own room, thank you very much.”

“...That’s not why I asked for the same room.”

“Huh. Then why? Because it’s cheaper than— Augh! W-What was that for?!”

“You deserved it. Every time you mention Her Holiness, you get that dumb look on your face...”

Sain still found himself puzzled by Melia’s outbursts, but chalked it up to the stresses of a new life in an unfamiliar world.

In terms of rooming arrangements, the academy did allow for two students to share a room, but only if they were the same gender. Melia’s request was, therefore, denied.

After a simple breakfast at the cafeteria, they made their way to the academy. The dormitories were located off of school grounds, so their path took them through the nearby town. As they walked up a gentle slope of paved stone, they found themselves in the company of many other students also heading to their first day at Jenifa Royal Magic Academy.

The entrance ceremony took place in the same auditorium where the magical assessment was conducted. Rows of simple folding chairs were laid out across the large hall. Seats didn’t seem to be preassigned, so Sain and Melia headed toward the center where they’d have a good view of the stage. There, they ran into a familiar face.

“Oh, hey, you two.” Alicia waved at them from among the sea of

chairs.

After exchanging greetings, they walked over to her.

“...I see someone’s wearing the same get-up today.”

“Of course. This is my uniform.”

For the record, his non-uniform apparel was more or less the same.

The auditorium was alive with the buzz of conversation as the headmaster and his deputy stepped onto the stage. In a matter of seconds, a hush had swept over the room.

“We would now like to commence the entrance ceremony for our new intermediate division students.”

Following this terse introduction by the deputy, the headmaster took the podium.

“I’d like to thank you all for your participation in yesterday’s proficiency assessment. I have already met each and every one of you during the interviews, but please allow me to officially introduce myself. My name is Mort Dartens. I serve as the headmaster here.

“As you may already know, bar a few rare exceptions, our academy welcomes any and all students who knock on its doors. To use an example, I draw your attention to two religions that coexist in this academy: Vicitaelism from the western continent, and Shartegallism from the east. While many learning institutes only accept students of one of these two religions, here at Jenifa Royal Magic Academy we embrace both. Of course, those who are not religious are just as welcome. Take a look around you. As you can see, your peers are of a multitude of races and backgrounds. It is my earnest hope that, by sharing your experiences with each other, you may enrich your minds and expand your horizons.

“But we at Jenifa Royal Magic Academy do not pride ourselves on our student count alone. To do so would be to peddle empty fame. No, at our academy, we provide a learning environment worthy of our name. A learning environment that is the very best in the kingdom—nay, the continent. To see the truth of my words, one need look no further than our labyrinth. For those of you who may be unaware, labyrinths are structures that hide vast amounts of resources, and their ownership is often a point of contention among kingdoms. Brimming with monsters and treasure, they are the very embodiment of risk and return. It is, therefore, almost unheard of for an academy to possess a labyrinth under its own name—‘almost’ because, of course, we are the exception. Our labyrinth is freely traversable by our students, and I encourage you all to take up the challenge.

“In addition, our academy has a partnership with the Adventurers’ Guild in the capital, who have agreed to forward some of the requests they receive on to us. In other words, students will have the

opportunity to gain hands-on experience in the field, and, for this reason, our graduates are often in very high demand. In fact, I do remember one of our graduates last year was accepted into the Loribanian Royal Guard. It was undoubtedly one of my proudest moments.”

Even though the headmaster, Mort, focused his speech on the glories of the academy, nobody in the audience was under any illusion about the trials and tribulations that went unmentioned. It was true that the academy offered a peerless environment for learning, but it was also this environment that earned Jenifa Royal Magic Academy the moniker “Hell on Earth.” It wasn’t as though the labyrinth and the guild requests existed as isolated challenges for the capable and brave, either; these brutal, unforgiving “opportunities” were in fact a part of the curriculum. No matter how unwilling they might be, all students would be forced to endure their ordeals.

Once the headmaster had finished, his deputy ran through the schedule for the events to follow, speaking as tersely as she had during her introduction.

And with that, the ceremony concluded.

One by one, the students rose from their seats, many dramatically throwing their limbs out as they stretched their stiffened muscles.

“Shall we go, then?”

Lectures would be starting soon, but before then, they had to check their class assignments.

In front of the school building, a crowd had gathered around a wooden bulletin board on which each student’s assigned class was posted. Performance in the proficiency assessment was taken into account when dividing up the students, but it was apparently not the only consideration.

“With all that talk about a competitive, merit-based system, I thought they’d just split the classes based on the assessment rankings.”

“That happens from the second year. There are some students who might seem weak now, but then turn out to be quick learners. Consider this year a grace period for those people to shine.”

“I see. Another way to look at it is that, if you’re still a straggler by the end of this year, then that’s when you’ll have truly failed.” Sain accompanied his words with a nod of comprehension.

“Now, let’s see which class each of us are...”

Sain read through the names on the bulletin board until he found his own, which was listed under “class four.” Melia turned out to be in the same class, which might have been the school doing them a favor. Looking further down the list, he also noticed Alicia’s name.

“Ugh... Same class...” she muttered with disgust.

“What’s the matter, Miss Gold? Is there a problem with you being

in the same class as us?”

“W-Well, no. Not, like, a *problem*, but...”

“I believe what she means to say is, ‘Oh god, am I seriously going to be in the same classroom as this weirdo? Geez, this is going to be one terrible year.’”

“R-Really? Is that true?”

“No! No, that’s not it! It’s because I...” Despite her quick denial of Melia’s interpretation, Alicia trailed off without an explanation. Her expression darkened and, eventually, she responded with a quiet, “You’ll see what I mean.”

Sain met her with a puzzled look, but received no further response.

And so the three headed to their shared classroom.

+ + +

The interior of the school was every bit as lavish as its exterior. Open, spacious, and impeccably clean; it was the kind of atmosphere that fostered a desire to learn.

Feeling particularly energized, Sain stepped through the doorway to his classroom. A number of students were already inside, all of whom stared in his direction. Their gazes moved from Alicia, to Sain, then to Melia, lingering on the “dark knight” and his maid in particular.

Sain’s demonic uniform was no doubt the main cause of all the attention, but that didn’t seem to bother him. His previous life had made him extremely used to being the center of attention, and so he walked up to a nearby chair, unfazed, and slumped into it.

“Welcome to class, everyone. I’m your homeroom teacher, Elina Rastania,” said the lady at the front of the room. By the time she had taken her place at the lectern, almost every seat had been filled.

“As this is our first class together, I’d like you all to introduce yourselves.” She turned to the blackboard and, using a piece of white chalk, listed three things: “Your name,” “something about you,” and “a spell you’re good at.”

“This year, we’re going to have each of you show us a magic spell you’re good at, though let me remind you that this isn’t a competition. Now, let’s start by the window and work our way round.”

The practice of showing off a spell as a demonstration of one’s ability was not limited to students. It was fairly widespread, and even most adults kept a flashy spell or two in their back pocket in case they needed to flex their skills.

None of the students raised any issue with Elina’s proposal, and the self-introductions moved along smoothly. One of the students generated fireworks on the spot using balls of fire. Another froze

running water into an elegant ice sculpture. A myriad of dazzling performances were on display, each of such high quality that even Sain, who was rather dense about the goings-on of people his age, could tell this was a class of exceptional individuals. No one else here leeches from talents that had been bestowed upon them; each and every one of them had earned their skills through hard work.

Sain tightened a fist. He wanted to become like them, and fast.

He became lost in his thoughts, and, before he knew it, it was Melia's turn to speak.

"Off I go, then." She pattered up to the front of the class and stood behind the lectern, where she began her introductions with the same apathetic expression she always wore. "My name is Melia. I'm the personal attendant to that creepy person over there. I'm a fivekind, and my strong elements are fire and water. Here's my spell."

She held out her right hand, palm facing up. Then, her petite lips began to move, reciting a series of incantations.

"Water in bloom, scatter into petals of crystal—Worta Nerro!"

Streams of water rose up all around her, falling back down in a shower of translucent petals, each glowing with a mysterious light. They materialized out of nowhere and lasted for only a few seconds before vanishing into the ground with a small *splash*. But they kept appearing, rising and falling in a mesmerizing show of sound and light. It was a complex spell that demanded immaculate control from its user.

The whole class found themselves entranced by the impressive spectacle.

"Marvelous. The spell we just saw requires a very high level of control over magical energy. Mastery over a spell like this suggests that Miss Melia here is capable of an array of other spells, too. I look forward to your future accomplishments."

"Thank you very much." Melia received Elina's praise with a quick bow.

Meanwhile, Sain was starting to sweat. An impressive performance had the effect of drastically increasing the pressure for the next performer. That was stressful enough, but Melia was also Sain's attendant. He could feel the expectant gazes around him wondering what marvels her master would have in store.

This was his school debut—a moment for the history books. Failure was not an option.

Once he had traded spots with Melia at the lectern, he steeled his nerves and spoke.

"The name is Sain Fostess. As is evident, I am he who inherits the power of fallen angels."

Someone in the class gave a dry laugh.

“A powerful darkness sleeps within me. However, due to its sheer power, I do not yet have full control over it. The reason I came to this school was to gain mastery over this dark power of mine. I suppose that will do for introductions... Now, allow me to show you my magic.”

After setting the stage in a way that offered a plausible excuse for his current incompetence, he opened his palm toward the audience and activated his spell.

“Darku!”

A small black ball the size of a fist appeared in his palm with a sharp *pop*. “Darku” was beginner darkness magic that involved the solidification and ejection of dark energy. It was an extremely simple spell, requiring little in the way of both fuel and fine control. In fact, as its classification suggested, it could be easily picked up even by beginners in the junior division.

After displaying the magical equivalent of a cheap party trick, Sain’s expression lit up with pride.

“I... I did it! Yes! I really did it! Did you— Ah!”

Only after noticing the cold reception of his audience did he realize his mistake and freeze, hands still raised in celebration. A moment later, he quickly recomposed himself.

“L-Let that be a lesson to you all. A ferocious beast lies within me. T-Tread carefully in my presence...”

His classmates watched mockingly as he stammered through his closing statement.

“Hmph. Go ahead. Laugh if you want,” he said to Alicia in a self-deprecating tone as he plunked himself down on his chair.

To his surprise, however, Alicia made no attempt to laugh. Her expression remained dark as she stood up.

“I wish I could...” she whispered in a heavy voice.

Taking her position at the lectern, she introduced herself in the same despondent manner.

“My name is Alicia Remia. This is my spell.”

Sain had only met Alicia the day before, but they had interacted enough for him to have a rough understanding of her character—a character that was at odds with the cheerless introduction she had just given.

“Orb of fire, purge with raging flames—Flare.”

A large ball of fire grew from her palm. The process was similar to Sain’s “Darku” spell. The scale, however, was incomparable. A dense mass of flame the size of a human head floated steadily in the shape of a perfect sphere.

But, despite this impressive feat, there was a hint of shame in the way Alicia regarded her own spell.

“What, not gonna cast a light spell?” a student hollered at her from one of the back rows. “What’re you playing with fire magic for, you fraud? Clan of Light, my ass!”

“Hey! Quiet back there!”

The teacher reprimanded the heckling student, but it was already too late; their words couldn’t be unheard. They had reached everyone in the room, Sain and Melia included.

“...I’m done.”

Alicia made no attempt to rebuke the vile comments. Instead, she bit her lip and returned to her seat, her face twisted into an unmissable scowl of pain and frustration.

Once the self-introductions had concluded, it was time for lunch break. In an attempt to cheer Alicia up, Sain and Melia convinced her to show them to the cafeteria.

“Sorry for keeping it a secret,” Alicia apologized in a weak voice. She hadn’t touched anything on her plate. “Here. This is the result of my magical assessment.”

She pushed a small piece of paper across the table toward Sain and Melia. It read, “Genus: Lightkind. Rank C.”

“The Remias... My family belongs to the Clan of Light.”

Her explanation was terse, but it was all Sain and Melia needed to hear to understand her circumstances.

A clan referred to the practice of ensuring a family’s descendants all belonged to the same magical genus, and a person’s genus was dependent on their bloodline. In other words, by allowing only select blood into the lineage, a family could increase the chance of its descendants being born into a certain genus.

The Clan of Light, as its name suggested, was a lineage focused on producing lightkind, so it was likely that Alicia’s parents and grandparents were all lightkind as well.

“For the Clan of Light, it’s terribly shameful to have a descendant who’s not lightkind. Fortunately, I am, but... whenever I try to use light magic, no matter what I do, it always becomes fire magic.”

“What?! No way!”

Pure shock caused Sain to slap the table and leap to his feet.

“Crossing categories is like leaping a canyon. The fire magic you showed us during your self-introduction... That was truly impressive. I mean it. Unless you’re fivekind, it shouldn’t be possible to reach that level of mastery in fire!”

Sain was still reeling. The acquisition of magic beyond one’s aptitude... That was literally his wish—the very thing he’d been pursuing all this time. It took someone like Sain to fully appreciate the anomalous nature of Alicia’s statement—to understand its true significance—because he’d been there. He’d tried his hardest, but the

wall he'd come up against was of an insurmountable height.

"I didn't master it. It's... probably faster to show you. *Flagus!*"

Alicia cast the beginner-level fire spell, "Flagus." A small ball of flames appeared in her palm.

"Here. Try touching it."

"...Huh?"

"It's fine. Come on. Give me your hand."

She grabbed his left hand and pulled his fingers into the flame.

"W-Wait! Stop! No! Auuugggh— Huh? It's... not hot?"

Sain had expected the sickening stench of roasting flesh, but it never came. He didn't even feel hot. Instead, there was a pleasant warmth in his fingers.

"My fire magic is all for show. It doesn't burn anything. I couldn't even warm up this soup." She tapped the bowl on the table with one finger. "The most I can do with it is... maybe scare someone. Remember yesterday? I saw my life flash before my eyes when I ran into you. I was so relieved when I found out you weren't an intruder. If you really were, that would have been it for me. I would have been helpless." Alicia's misery deepened as she spoke, and she seemed to be on the verge of tears. "I pretty much lied to you, didn't I? I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier..."

Sensing her frustration, Sain responded in a calm voice:

"...No one will blame you for keeping it a secret. It's not an easy thing to talk about, after all."

"Exactly. If anything, Master Sain is the weird one here. I've seen dragons with thinner skin than him. If anyone with normal sensibilities got an F on their magical assessment, they'd spend the rest of their life hiding in their room in shame."

"Damn it, maid. Would it make you happier if I *did* go hide in my room in shame?"

In spite of the heavy atmosphere, Sain and Melia traded their usual jab and retort. The routine elicited a giggle from Alicia.

"You two never change, do you?"

Seeing her expression brighten, Sain and Melia exchanged a quick smile as well.

"Miss Gold, what are your own thoughts on this matter? Are you happy using just fire magic? ...Or do you still wish you could use light magic?"

The question caused Alicia to look down at her feet. Her lips trembled ever so slightly.

"...All the teachers at school tell me to learn fire magic. Compared to my light magic, which hasn't ever shown even the slightest sign of materializing, my fire magic is at least usable, even if only on the surface. Over and over again, they say that I'm just doing it wrong,

and that, if I keep practicing, I'll be able to use proper fire magic one day." She paused. Then, she turned her face up to meet Sain's gaze. "But I want to use light magic."

Her eyes wavered, but the spark of determination in them did not. She continued.

"There are a few people who support me. Even someone like me... They're mostly family. My mom and dad, too. They never push me. They said that, even if the clan's lineage ends with them, they're fine with it as long as I'm happy. But... I don't want that. I want to live up to their expectations. For my ancestors, and my family, I want to be strong... I want the power of my clan. The power of light. That... is my goal."

"I see..."

Alicia spoke in fragments, but the emotion behind her words was clear. Sain could feel her frustration toward a reality determined to thwart her, and the unyielding hope that kept her plowing forward.

He looked her in the eyes, his expression serious.

"Miss Gold, this struggle of yours... When did it start to trouble you?"

"Huh? Um, I think when I was ten? Before then, I still believed in the possibility that—"

"Ah. It seems that I just edged you out," he said with a flick of his finger. "I was first."

The two girls listened as Sain launched into his own backstory.

"We're two of a kind, you and I. There's something I've been seeking for many years now. But, I still don't have it. I've grasped at it time and time again, but no matter how close I seem to get, it's always out of reach. My endeavors so far have earned me nothing but burdens. This is why I've come to this academy. I've become a student here so I can gain that which I desire. I know that during my self-introduction I said I came here to master the power of darkness that sleeps within me. ...That was a lie." Sain looked down with a pained expression. "I apologize for tricking you."

"Uh, you didn't really trick me. It's not like I believed anything you said."

"Wait, what?"

"...What?"

"...U-Um, okay. That's fine."

It wasn't fine. In fact, it hurt quite a bit. But he chose to push her words to the back of his mind for now.

"In any case! As a veteran in such matters, I have some advice for you. Listen well, young one! For as long as you strive to attain light magic, you must steel yourself against all other temptations. Anything else that may lead you astray should be ignored, else it will surely

lead you to compromise.”

“Uh... So...”

“We as humans respond strongly to hostility, and we can reject its advances. However, partial friendliness proves to be far more troublesome. There will be moments when its whispers reach us, and we forget our true desire, allowing it to lead us astray. My point is, be on guard for things like those. That, in my opinion, is how you maintain the will to see your pursuits to their end.” Sain folded his arms across his chest in silent affirmation of his own resolve. As someone who shared his struggle, he trusted that Alicia would listen to his words.

“Um, just so I know for sure...” Alicia looked at him with wide, earnest eyes. “You’re saying you support me, right?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re not going to, you know... make fun of me?”

“Of course not. Like I said, we’re two of a kind.”

“...Right.”

Alicia stopped stirring her soup. She slumped back in her chair and threw her head back, staring idly at the ceiling for a while before speaking again.

“You know, I was thinking about this in the classroom, but... You really have another side to you. I mean, you look like one of those people who tend to stand out in the most annoying ways, but you’re actually... nice? And you can be pretty persuasive. Almost like...”

Her eyes wandered upward as she trailed off, as though she was looking for the right word to describe him. Having listened to her concerns and consoled her, Sain felt a slight sense of excitement at her impending words of praise.

“I’ve got it! You’re just like a priest!”

“Gyeeeeeeeh?!”

“What?! What’s the problem?!”

“Not a priest! Anything but a priest!”

Sain dropped his head into his hands and groaned. Alicia’s remark had dealt a mortal blow. There were so many other choices. She could have said a counsellor, or a teacher—anything else, really. But no. Of all things, she had to pick the *one* he couldn’t stand to be likened to.

“By the way, you never mentioned what that thing you desired actually was. Why *did* you come to this academy?”

“Hm? Oh, uh, well...”

“Hey, I just spilled my guts for you. Let’s see some reciprocity.”

Sain considered his situation. It was something he had to keep secret back in his homeland, but now that he was in a new environment, it shouldn’t really matter if everyone found out.

“I want to become the dark knight,” he announced with the

utmost confidence.

“‘Dark knight’? You mean... *the* dark knight?”

“Indeed.”

“That’s... a tough one to cheer for.”

“Why?!”

“Well... I know the two knights are equally famous, but, like... Look, the holy knight is one thing, but there really aren’t a whole lot of people aspiring to become the dark knight.”

“Because the holy knight is the one who saves the good, and the dark knight is the one who punishes the evil? Is that what you mean?”

“Yeah, basically.”

There existed two deities in this world: the goddess Vicitaelia, referred to by the people as “Her Holiness,” and the god Shartegallia, who was similarly known as “His Holiness.” They each had their own “chosen one”—the holy knight and dark knight, respectively—who were selected to receive their blessings.

However, these two gods were fundamentally dissimilar. While Vicitaelia existed to save the good, Shartegallia existed to punish the evil, and their chosen knights would also reflect these natures. The holy knight was granted the power to save and protect those in need, and his feats were rightly hailed as noble and heroic. The dark knight, however, specialized in slaying the villains and monsters who threatened the world. His deeds, therefore, were drenched in blood and savagery.

The two stood as equals, both chosen warriors of the gods. But the people’s admiration was vastly skewed toward the holy knight.

“Hmph. You simply don’t understand! That ominous aura... and the endless depths of dark magic that swallows all in its path... No one knows just how much darkness resides in his form. Perhaps he even made a pact with a great demon... But alas, you poor girl; how tragic it is for you to not understand the beauty of the dark knight. You have my pity.”

“I’m not poor and I don’t need your pity. With that said, though... It all makes sense now. No wonder. So *that’s* why you’re so weird. It’s all because of that. ...Melia, it must have been so hard for you.”

“It really has been. All this time... All the sweat and blood...”

Sain watched with curious incomprehension as the two girls shared a moment of deep empathy.

“Look, I don’t want to rain on your parade, but how do you actually intend on becoming the dark knight? You have to be chosen by one of the gods to become either one, right? Other than that... you can also have the power handed down to you from the current knight, I think?”

“Correct. You seem to know a lot about this.”

"No, I'm pretty sure this is just common knowledge."

"...Did you know the blessing of the gods strengthens the magic of the knights?"

"Yeah, that's pretty well known, too. The holy knight uses light magic, and his counterpart dark magic, so they're known as the apex of their respective categories. The highest lightkind, and the highest darkkind."

"Correct again. To put it simply, the dark knight is the most powerful dark mage in the world. However, consider this: What happens if someone appears who's an even more powerful dark mage than the dark knight? In all likelihood... the dark knight would bequeath his blessing to the newcomer, because he would make better use of such powers."

"H-Hold on a minute. What? So, you want to get better than the *dark knight*? You're trying to become stronger than someone who has *literal godly power* when you're only human?"

"That's right. It's probably the only way."

"...Have you considered, like... I don't know... getting cozy with the current dark knight, maybe?"

"A knight chosen by the gods won't give his power to me just because we're friends. Throughout history, the knight's mantle has always been passed down to the most suitable candidate. If I can become someone who deserves that mantle, the dark knight might even come and seek me out."

Sain spoke with such conviction that Alicia had no words. She merely stared at him, her mouth agape.

"You must think I'm a lunatic. It's a fair opinion. Even I understand the steepness of my path."

"...I don't think you're a lunatic. I'm just surprised. You normally act like such an idiot... and, honestly, this plan of yours is pretty idiotic as well, but... it actually makes sense."

"Of course. I refuse to compromise on my dream. I'm serious about becoming the dark knight, so I always think about it seriously. It doesn't matter how hard it might be. It's *my* dream, so *I* decide when to quit. And I never will, so, therefore, I am invincible!"

"Okay, you've definitely stopped making sense."

Sain puffed his chest out confidently nonetheless. He had meant every word. It sounded absurd to Alicia, but she couldn't help but let out a laugh.

"I take back what I said. You *are* just an idiot." She focused her gaze on him, eyes squinted as though she were dazzled by a brilliant glow. "But you helped me to feel better. Even someone like you has a big dream you're chasing after... I can't afford to lose now, can I?"

She smiled. It was a radiant smile; pure, and unmarred by worry

or concern.

Chapter 2: The Labyrinth Trial

It was the second day of school and lectures were proceeding smoothly. Sain and his classmates listened intently to their teacher, diligently transcribing her every word into their notebooks. The topic of the day was instrumentology: The study of weapons, armor, and items used as catalysts for magic.

“By the way, everyone, have you ever thought about what the strongest weapon is?” Elina asked.

A studious-looking boy in the front row raised his hand.

“I think it’s either the holy sword or the doom sword.”

“Correct.”

Elina flipped a page on her textbook, and the students followed suit.

“The holy sword refers to the blade that received the blessings of Her Holiness, and the doom sword to the blade blessed by His Holiness. There exists a widespread misconception that these can only be bestowed upon us by the gods, but the truth is that these weapons can in fact be crafted by the hand of man. In particular, research into the holy sword has been progressing...”

“—Hm?”

Elina continued her explanation, but Sain’s note-taking hand no longer scrawled across the page.

“Maid.”

“Yes?”

“That doesn’t sound like the holy sword I know of.”

“It sure doesn’t. I was wondering about that too, actually.”

It seemed he wasn’t the only one who had some doubts about what he was hearing.

“Would you like to share your conversation with the class?”

Their focus was pulled back to the front of the room where Elina stood, fixing the two with an intimidating glare.

“Teacher, I have a question. It appears that the holy sword I know and the holy sword you know aren’t the same. Does the concept of the holy sword differ between regions and races?”

His sudden question seemed to take Elina by surprise, as her eyes widened a little.

“...Now that you mention it, you transferred in from the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge, right? Okay, then let’s spend a little more time

talking about the holy sword. To put it simply, your understanding of the term does indeed depend on where you come from. The idea that these swords can be forged by mankind is dependent on non-religious definitions; if you believe in Vicitaelism, for example, then you would only recognize the blade bestowed by Her Holiness as the holy sword. So, under this criteria, you wouldn't call a man-made weapon the holy sword, even if it did receive her blessing. Since Vicitaelism is the state religion of Lightridge, it's likely everyone there has the same perception."

Sain nodded in silent agreement. In the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge, calling a man-made weapon the holy sword was a blasphemous act.

"On that note, I believe the current holy knight comes from Lightridge."

"Ha-wha—?!"

This time, Sain was the one taken by surprise. In his panic, he had managed to conjure no more than a nonsensical cry.

"You've probably met him before, haven't you?"

"N-N-No, I haven't! Nope! Never seen the guy!"

Despite his excessively panicked reaction earning him a suspicious glance from Elina, she didn't pry any further. Meanwhile, their exchange had caused a wave of hushed commotion to spread through the classroom, as students fervently shared rumors of the esteemed holy knight.

"You know the holy knight's supposed to be the same age as us?"

"You serious? Someone who's saved the world a bunch of times is our age? Man, talk about living in a different world."

"Yeah, because he's there, Lightridge doesn't get attacked by anyone. And monsters stay away from them, too. He's like a symbol of peace."

"Well, he is the strongest knight in the world. Would you really go pick a fight with the guy?"

"Man, I wish I was like that."

Sain could feel his skin crawl more with each successive statement.

"Ms. Elina, who's stronger? The holy knight or the dark knight?"

"Hm... That's a tough question. It's widely known that the two knights are a paired existence, equal and opposite. What isn't really made public, however, is what kind of powers they actually have. What we do know is that the holy knight is the highest ranking lightkind, and the dark knight is the highest ranking darkkind. You've already learned about affinities between elements, yes? Can anyone tell me how the relationship between light and darkness works?"

"Um, they're weak to each other. Their powers cancel one another

out.”

“That’s correct. The powers of the two knights follow this same principle as well. The inherent properties of light and dark magic mean their effects would be nullified. Therefore... should the two knights ever attack each other, both of their attacks would be negated.”

“So, the fight would never end?”

“If they were equal in strength, I suppose so.”

The student who’d asked the question nodded, having seemingly grasped the concept.

“The holy sword and doom sword bestowed upon us by the gods are one of a kind, and are currently in the possession of the holy knight and dark knight, respectively. The ones created artificially, on the other hand, are much more prevalent. Technically, they’re under the control of the state, but their possession and use isn’t heavily regulated. Considering a couple of the swords produced in ancient times have already gone missing, it’s clear that they’re not always under state supervision. Furthermore, these man-made alternatives vary greatly in terms of quality. Both represent the strongest weapons there are, but remember that only a small handful are truly exceptional.

“Ah, by the way—I should mention that, under permission from the Kingdom of Loribania, Jenifa Royal Magic Academy is, in fact, keeping a few holy and doom swords within its premises. This has been done to stimulate a sense of competition among the students. They’ve been placed in various spots throughout the labyrinth, and it’s finders keepers, so we encourage you to try your hand at finding them.”

While Elina spoke of the labyrinth in a fairly casual tone, traversing it was anything but. To take on its challenge was to put one’s life at risk. Labyrinths were, in a nutshell, the lairs of monsters. They had existed since time immemorial, and were terrifyingly threatening structures that continuously and endlessly spawned savage beasts. Normally, these monsters would spend their entire lives within the labyrinth, but when their numbers grew too large, it wasn’t uncommon for some to overflow into the outside world. In order to prevent this from happening, people would occasionally be sent inside to curb their numbers.

Labyrinths were, without a doubt, dangerous areas for humans to enter. Some cunning monsters were even capable of laying deadly traps to catch less experienced intruders unawares.

But what made that danger worth facing was the opportunity to reap significant reward. As the headmaster had described during the entrance ceremony, a variety of resources lay hidden within the

depths of a labyrinth. Defeating monsters yielded valuable materials; oftentimes, monster essences could be extracted from the minerals and plants that dotted their walls, and some of these resources could only be found within labyrinths. As a result, they had become an accepted part of modern society.

Regardless, that did not make them any safer, and they were certainly not playgrounds for students.

Sain wore a difficult frown as he considered the implications of venturing into the labyrinth. His classmates, however, seemed less concerned, and another hand shot up.

“Ms. Elina, what about the sword in the labyrinth? What’s it like?”

“Let me think... I believe the one placed most recently was a holy sword that strengthens light magic.”

Elina had barely finished her sentence when a wide-eyed Alicia leapt to her feet.

“Alicia? Is something wrong?”

“Oh! Um... No. Sorry.”

Having been showered by gazes, she timidly sat back down. Her hands, however, were balled into tight fists.

+ + +

“Sain! We’re going to find that holy sword!”

“...I knew you’d say that.”

While Alicia was excitedly announcing her intent, Sain’s face was twisted as though he’d bit into something very bitter.

“You heard, right? About the holy sword in the labyrinth? She said it strengthens light magic! If I can get my hands on that, I might be able to use light magic!”

Sain was glad to see this enthusiasm in her; he appreciated the sight of her chasing single-mindedly after her dream. Yet, despite that, he couldn’t bring himself to go along with her plan.

“Miss Gold, I know you don’t want to hear this, but... Count me out.”

“Why?!”

“Because I have no interest in it whatsoever! I refuse to spend my time looking for a freakin’ holy sword!” Sain yelled. All that talk during the lecture had left him rather disgruntled, and he couldn’t help but take the opportunity to vent some frustration. To him, holy swords were anathema. He wanted nothing to do with them, so the thought of going hunting for one was absolutely out of the question.

“Uh-huh... Oh, I get it. You’re scared, aren’t you?”

“...That’s not true.”

“Then what?”

“...Hmph. It’s none of your business.”

Sain's secretive attitude caused Alicia to scowl.

"Seriously? After getting me excited with all that pep talk, you're just going to walk away?"

"Gah! Okay, that's true..."

Admittedly, she had a point. He had cheered her on just the other day. It was perhaps a tad irresponsible of him, but circumstances were circumstances—and his were especially prohibitive.

"Okay, first of all, why are you even asking me? You're from here! Go ask one of your other friends!"

"Th-That's because I figured you were lonely! I-It's not like you have any friends either!"

"Wh-What? I-I'm not lonely! Who said I'm lon— Wait, did you just say 'either'?"

"Huh? U-Uh, no? I don't know what you're talking about."

"...Hah, I see what's going on. You're lonely, too."

"Aha! You said 'too'! I heard you loud and clear! Which means you're also a loner! Mm-hm-hm. But, don't worry. I'm a loner, too!"

"Gah! Stop making it sound like a shared interest! We're not loneliness buddies, okay? I chose to embrace my solitude!"

"Oh, so we're not buddies now? What happened to us being two of a kind, huh?"

"I didn't mean it like that!"

Their battle of words grew more heated with each pointed comeback. Ultimately, it was the realization they'd become the focus of a steadily growing audience that put a stop to their argument. Breaking out in a cold sweat, they both looked at each other.

"...Let's take this somewhere else."

"...Fine."

As they looked for an area away from the prying eyes, Sain felt the haze of ire clear from his mind, and he broached the topic again in a calmer tone.

"Look, my point is, I'm not going. And it's not because I'm scared. Holy swords and me, we're like water and oil. We don't mix well. ...In fact, it's worse than that. We're more like *fire* and oil. If I even go near them, my seals will break."

"...Seals? What are you talking about?"

"Hmph. And, at last, we've come to this topic. You see, sealed within my soul is a forbidden—"

"Hey, Melia. What's he talking about?"

"Probably one of his past traumas. Like the time he—"

"Stuff happened, okay?! Just... stuff happened. And let's leave it at that," urged a flustered Sain, who sensed that Melia was about to get a little too specific.

"Basically, Master Sain's allergic to holy swords. If he touches or

gets close to one, all sorts of things happen to his body.”

“Geez, what kind of weird condition is that? Ugh, whatever. Fine. I get that you don’t want to go. But, still, you’re the only one I can ask. Please?”

“No. There’s nothing in it for me.”

“Pretty please?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Please! Just do me this one favor! I’ll owe you for life!”

“No means no!”

No matter how much Alicia continued to grovel, Sain refused to budge. Upon realizing her attempts were having little effect, she paused, deep in thought.

“...Hey, didn’t you say you’re trying to become the dark knight?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Don’t you want a doom sword, then?”

“Huh?”

Despite having resolved to refute her efforts mere moments ago, the words “doom sword” caused Sain to perk up.

“You heard Ms. Elina, right? It’s not just holy swords in the labyrinth. There are doom swords, too. I’m after the holy swords, but, you know... There’s no guarantee we’ll find what I want, right? What if we happened to come across a doom sword in the process?”

“Hnngh... Hnnnnnnnngh!”

“If there’s a holy sword that strengthens light magic, then there might be a doom sword that strengthens dark magic, right? The doom sword is a symbol of the dark knight, after all. It seems like a good opportunity for you, in my opinion.”

“Y-You do have a point...”

Alicia was absolutely right. For Sain, who was cripplingly incompetent when it came to dark magic, such an item would be a godsend—almost literally.

“Also, artificial holy and doom swords are apparently made with pretty similar materials, and the crafting process isn’t all that different, either. I heard that a skilled blacksmith can take one and reforge it into the other.”

“Seriously?!” cried Sain in a voice so loud it actually startled Alicia.

“Y-Yeah,” she nodded; “I’ve looked into holy swords a few times before, so I’m pretty sure.”

“How could I have not known about this! I’m a fool...”

Sain shook with frustration at his own ignorance. But then, he stopped. His frown became one of contemplation rather than anger.

“Wait a minute... Let’s calm down and work through the logic here... There’s no way I could be lacking in knowledge about holy

swords. Man-made or god-made, as long as it's holy, it's my turf. Which means..." Without warning, he launched into a loud and impassioned tirade. "That goddess! She kept it a secret from me on purpose! Gyeeeeeeeh! Unforgivable! That damn woman and her shady ways! The lengths she'd go to to keep me from becoming a dark knight!"

"...Hey, Melia, your master is a total weirdo."

"Don't hold it against him. He's sort of *this*"—she twirled an extended index finger through the air—"in the head."

Sain's angry ranting continued while the two girls tattled about him. He didn't seem to hear them, nor did he seem to notice the weird glances he was getting from everyone nearby.

Suddenly, his cries had stopped, and he produced a book from seemingly nowhere. Carved into its deep green cover was the shape of a cross. He flipped aggressively through it, looked up, and started shouting again.

"It's... It's not even in the bible! So much for signposts! It's got none of the stuff that I actually need to know! Gah! Stupid book! I'm gonna rip you to shreds!"

"Ah— Master Sain, that might be going a little too far."

"Silence, maid! All who stand in my path shall meet their end by my hands!"

"If you rip up the bible, the only one who's going to meet their end is you."

"I don't care! Maybe this'll teach that damn woman to behave! Let's see what she does if I— Ow! What the—? Hot! It's so hot! Why is it turning so hot?! Gah! Hnnngh... Damn you, goddess! I know you're watching! Damn youuuuuuuu!"

Sain slammed the book down as he yelled up at the sky. The book, now red hot, hit the ground amidst a cloud of steam, bounced, and melted into the air. A heavy silence fell upon the room, broken only by his intermittent gasps for air.

It was only once he'd caught his breath that he turned to a flabbergasted Alicia.

"...You see, this is the kind of tragedy that happens to me when I'm around holy swords."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure none of that had anything to do with holy—"

"Anyway! If you don't mind more mishaps like this, then I'd be glad to accompany you. I won't touch any holy swords, but I'll help you look for them. Like you said... I do want a doom sword."

"Well, thanks for making me a lot less sure that bringing you along is a good idea... Still, you're all I've got. Let's do this. I need a pretty specific holy sword, so if we find one that's not quite right for me, you can have it. In return, you'll do everything you can to help

me look for it. Agreed?"

"Agreed! Just leave it to me!"

Sain pounded his chest in a show of reassurance, but the gesture only caused Alicia to eye him even more suspiciously. Her lack of friends, however, left her with no choice but to rely on him. Their newfound alliance was built more on circumstance than any kind of goodwill.

After concluding their discussion, the three headed back to class. On the way there, Sain looked up at the sky with an oddly pleading expression and said, "Just so we're clear, I want a doom sword. Not a holy sword, okay? A doom sword."

"Who are you talking to?"

Sain was, of course, speaking to a certain woman whose excessive worrying had recently taken on a tinge of jealousy.

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Having resolved to explore the labyrinth, Sain and the girls moved quickly to prepare.

"First, the shopping trip!" declared an energetic Alicia once class had ended.

Labyrinths were swarmed not only with ferocious monsters, but also lethal traps. While the one owned by the academy was of a more student-friendly difficulty, the risk of death was nonetheless present.

Even so, the three headed to the nearby town to purchase necessary supplies.

"So, what are we looking for here?"

"Well, pretty much everything you need to explore a labyrinth. Maps we can get from the academy, so that leaves medicines and weapons and stuff. If we have some extra cash, I wouldn't mind getting some monster traps as well."

"A-Ah, yes, of course. Maps and... um, stuff. I knew that."

"...Did you really?"

"...I'm sorry. I lied. I have no idea what I'm doing. I've never actually explored a labyrinth before."

"Oh, come on. How old are you again? That's just pure laziness now. You'd better step it up if you want to become the dark knight."

Though Sain hung his head in shame, his confession wasn't entirely true. He'd explored labyrinths, just never *properly*. Improperly—that is, by cheating—he'd done it too many times to count, but taking the time to explain just didn't seem worthwhile.

"Oh, by the way, what weapon do you use, Sain? A sword?"

"Hm? Yes, how did you know?"

"I figured as much because you had a sword with you when you put on that get-up of yours during the magical assessment."

“Oh, actually, that sword is ornamental. It can’t be used in combat.”

“At least hold a normal sword! Geez! No wonder it looked so bulky...”

Alicia let out the kind of heavy sigh that tended to come after a long day of soul-draining work. Then, with tired eyes, she looked to Melia.

“And you? Any weapon preferences?”

“Mmm, I can use pretty much anything with a sharp edge. For the record, this is what I’m using right now.”

She reached behind her skirt and pulled out a dagger. It was cheap and mass-produced, but it was also one of the many she always carried on her.

“All right... Melia’s also good at magic, so she can handle either the front or back. I don’t have weapons since I only fight with magic, so I’m probably better off as the rearguard.”

“That means I’ll be in the front, then. Understood. With that said, my repertoire is pretty thin when it comes to decisive blows, so I’ll be counting on you to finish the job. My speciality is support, so I’ll handle things like stalling or confusing the enemy.”

“Got it.”

After working out how she was going to coordinate with Melia, Alicia turned to Sain.

“And you,” she said in a dull tone. “You’re moral support.”

“Okay, now that’s just being mean.”

“I’m kidding. You two are all I’ve got, after all. I’m going to need you to scout for us.”

“Scouting, you say... So, my job is to preemptively investigate the terrain and determine the enemy’s numbers. Very well, then.”

“Can you handle it?”

“Of course I can. There is no job I can’t handle. I shall be the perfect scout.”

As usual, Alicia eyed him with doubt, and as usual, this didn’t stop Sain from brazenly pushing out his chest.

“Hm? ...Wait a minute.” Remembering their conversation in the cafeteria, Sain continued with some hesitation. “Miss Gold, is your magic, uh... you know, going to be useful in the labyrinth?”

It occurred to him that Alicia’s fire magic, despite its intimidating appearance, was incapable of burning anything. Intimidating was literally all it could do.

“Don’t worry. My magic works on monsters.”

“What?”

“Don’t ask me why, but it burns monsters fine.” Alicia raised her shoulders into a shrug. “So don’t worry. Unless you get into a scuffle

with people, that is. Then I can't help you."

Sain scratched his chin. He was aware he was less informed than his peers, so he turned to Melia with a quizzical look, as if urging her to take the lead. Melia shook her head.

"Now, let's go buy Sain his weapon."

Alicia led the two into a store. At the top of the doorway was a large sign that read "Bresmel Workshop." As soon as they stepped in, Sain's eyes lit up.

"W-Wow! So this is a weaponsmith shop!"

"Now that you mention it, this is your first time in a place like this, isn't it, Master Sain?"

Rows upon rows of weapons were on display, all vying for his attention. It was indeed his first visit to a weaponsmith, and he could barely contain his excitement.

"We're taking on a tower-shaped labyrinth this time. In general, the hallways and rooms are all pretty big, so assume there are no weapon restrictions. Even if it's a little big, there's probably still enough space to swing it around."

With Alicia's advice in mind, Sain began to consider his options.

"Hey, Alicia. Welcome."

A girl waved to them from behind the counter. Her orange hair was held up with a bandana, and her clothes were stained by sweat and soot. Judging by her appearance, she worked here.

Alicia returned a smile.

"Yeah, been a while, Cisca. Get any good weapons in?"

"Some okay ones, I guess. Every year, around this time, the academy and the knights start focusin' on training their newcomers, so they start cutting off access to monster materials. We still get ores, but sales definitely drop off a bit... By the way, who're the other two?"

The girl motioned to Sain and Melia.

"Right. So, this is Sain, and this is his attendant, Melia."

"Oh? Mmm... Pleasure to meet you. I'm Cisca. I'm a blacksmith here."

"Pleasure's all mine."

"Likewise," Melia droned.

Sain had figured from her appearance that she wasn't just a pretty face, but, as it turned out, she wasn't even an apprentice. She was a full-fledged blacksmith, which meant some of the weapons he'd gawked at earlier had probably been crafted by her.

"So, what's the deal, Alicia? Pretty rare to see you with friends."

"What?! Th-That's not true!"

"Oh, it totally is. I mean, up until last year, your only two choices were hanging out with me or being a complete loner."

"Ahhhhhh! Stop! Don't say that! And you two, stop listening!"

screamed a flustered Alicia.

Sain watched her pityingly.

"I've gotta admit, though... What's that saying again? Birds of a feather stick together? No offence, but your friends are, uh, pretty unique, too... Hey, how'd the two of you get to know her?"

"We met at the academy the other day, and we've been with her ever since."

"Oh, you're both students at the academy?"

"Hm? Yes. Look at us. What else could we be?"

"Wait... That's your school uniform?"

Sain nodded as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. It wasn't, of course, considering how ridiculously customized it was. And it was perhaps a testament to Cisca's skill as a blacksmith that she managed to notice.

"By the way, are you going to explore the labyrinth in that get-up?" asked Alicia.

"Absolutely." Sain pulled open his coat slightly and showed her the inside. It was lined with layer upon layer of black, scale-like objects. "This is called a spellbinding coat. Countless fell dragon scales are woven into the lining. They feed on the wearer's dark energy and amplify its power. Such a coat may only be worn by the chosen, for its powers are too great for the common man. Should those of weak will lay their hands upon it, it could wreak havoc upon their minds and, indeed, their very sanity—"

"Cool. Here, let me see that."

"Ah! Damn it! Stop, you stupid— I just told you not to touch it!"

"It's fine. I've got plenty of mental fortitude."

"Lies! You wouldn't be such a loner if that was true!"

"Huh?! What do you mean?! I— I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Sain would have told her that was the reaction of someone who had a *very* good idea of what he was talking about, but before the words could even pass his lips she'd grabbed the coat by the collar and yanked it open. Her fingers traced the lining as she examined its scaly texture.

Seeing that the coat hadn't wreaked havoc on Alicia's mind nor her sanity, Cisca edged closer for a look as well.

"Sain, mind if I try feelin' it too?"

"N-No! Are you people even listening? I just said it's really dangerous—"

"Oh, c'mon, enough with the posturing. Look, Alicia's got her hands all over it and she's fine."

"S-Stop! I mean it! Don't touch—"



Sain's desperate warning fell on deaf ears as Cisca leaned in anyway, hand outstretched. However, just before her fingers touched his coat, she quickly pulled back.

"Whoa. Yikes... You were being serious, huh? This really is some nasty stuff."

"What are you talking about? Don't tell me you actually believe him. Half of the stuff that comes out of his mouth is nonsense."

"No, like, this actually is some dangerous stuff. I'm serious. In fact... I'm surprised you're okay."

"Huh? ...Oh, I get it. You saw a chance for a prank and you jumped on it. I'm not falling for that again. I've been tricked by you enough times already!"

"No, I'm— Okay, sure, so maybe I've had some fun with you in the past, but I'm serious about this."

"Nope! Not falling for that again! I *learn*, okay?"

Seeing Alicia's refusal to believe her, Cisca scratched her head and turned to Sain.

"Hey, Sain, just so I'm sure—You really shouldn't touch those things, right?"

"Absolutely not. Very few people can handle touching these. But..."

"Okay, can you both stop it with this joke already? It's not funny."

"It really isn't..." said Melia.

Hearing Melia come to her defense, Alicia turned to thank her, only to be shocked by her next words.

"It's not a joke at all."

Even Melia, whose face was always a mask of indifference, was wide-eyed with surprise.

"Hey, Cisca! If you've got time to yap with customers, come over here and give me a hand!"

A rough male voice rang out from the back of the store.

"Sorry! Comin'!"

Cisca spun round with a start and called back, matching the man's volume.

"Sorry, I've gotta go. Call me when you've figured out what weapon you want. Oh, and let's just say you all get an Alicia discount. Twenty percent off across the board!" Cisca pushed the words out briskly as she scurried to the storeroom, then disappeared from sight.

Sain shot Alicia a sideward glance.

"Close friends, I see."

"Well, yeah. We've known each other since we were in the junior division."

"Junior division? She's a student, then?"

“Was a student. She quit last year.”

“Quit?”

“Yeah. Apparently, learning magic was always just one aspect of her blacksmith training. After a while, she said she’d learned enough and the rest was irrelevant. And then she left the academy, just like that.”

“I see... She used the academy as a stepping stone, huh.”

The thought had crossed Sain’s mind as well. He might end up following in Cisca’s footsteps. Apparently, Jenifa’s reputation for having students with unique ideas about career paths was well-deserved.

“Well, let’s not loiter. Come on, time to choose a weapon.”

“Right.”

Sain promptly began trying out weapons. He picked them up one by one and ran them through his usual routine: Feel their weight, swing them around a little, strike an awesome pose or two.

“Miss Gold, I’ve found a few candidates. Do you have any preferences among these?” he said, holding up three swords.

“They’re all black.”

“Mhm. Aren’t they beautiful? Their blades are as dark as the night sky; a black so deep it could swallow you whole. Ah, it truly is the color that speaks to my soul. So? Which one do you think looks best on me?”

“There’s a difference?”

“Come on, stop messing around!” Sain whined. He was choosing weapons as frivolously as one might pick clothes. The irony was entirely lost on him.

“Well, this one’s pretty expensive. Can you afford it?”

“The weapon I choose I shall be trusting with my life. Money is of no concern.”

“All right, I like how you think. In that case, I recommend this one. It’s not the sharpest, but it looks durable, so a beginner like you can swing it around without having to worry about breaking it.”

“Good point. I had my eye on this one as well. It’s decided, then. This will be my purchase.”

Sain rang the counter bell. Cisca appeared again and, with a practiced motion, pulled the corresponding sheath from a shelf behind her and slid it onto the sword.

“Thank you very much! Come again!”

Once he’d paid, Sain walked out of the store with a satisfied grin. His new sword, black from blade to sheath, glinted with an ominously dark lustre.

“Huh. It’s getting late,” he said, noticing the orange tint of the sky.

“Do you want to grab something to eat before we call it a day?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Neither do I.”

“Good enough for me. Let’s go, then.”

Alicia took the lead, Sain and Melia following behind her. They passed through streets lined with all sorts of general stores until they eventually came to the food district. The sweet aroma of roasted herbs immediately overwhelmed their senses, and their stomachs grumbled in eager anticipation.

After a quick scan of their surroundings, Alicia stepped toward a building where clouds of hot steam drifted from the windows.

“Well, if it ain’t li’l Alicia! Come in and grab a seat!”

A friendly voice from the kitchen greeted them as soon as they stepped inside. Alicia replied in kind, placing herself on an empty seat.

Sain followed suit, slumping into an adjacent chair before noting, “You’re like a minor celebrity around here.”

“During our junior division years, Cisca and I spent a lot of time fooling around in this area. Clearly we made a lasting impression. By the way, this is where I used to work part-time.”

“Oi, Alicia, I’m up to my neck in orders ’ere! You mind givin’ me a hand?”

“The minute I step in! Geez! You’re a real slavedriver, you know that?”

“Gah ha ha! Sorry, but you know how it is! I never have enough hands round ’ere!”

“Then hire some!”

Sain watched quietly as Alicia got up from her seat. Despite the unmissable annoyance in her tone, there was a subtle skip in her step as she hurried off to the kitchen. Along the way, a number of customers and staff smiled and waved in her direction.

“Well, so much for all my worrying...” he mused. “Look at you. You’re loved by plenty of people.”

It was possible that Alicia had never told these people about her background and the Clan of Light. If so, it made their fondness for her all the more significant, all the more *genuine*, because it suggested there was *something else* they appreciated about her. Here, she was more than just her magic. While she might be spurned at the academy, she had found a place where she was accepted—where she belonged.

Sain found himself relieved at the thought. After all, she was no longer a stranger. She was someone who shared the same struggles and pursuits.

“Master Sain.”

“What is it?”

“Do you think the labyrinth trip will go smoothly?”

Sain took a sip of water before responding in a whisper:

“You think we’re missing some firepower?”

“Yes... And I’m not sure how much I trust Miss Alicia’s magic, to be honest. I’ve never heard of magic that only works on monsters...”

“Don’t worry. Everything Miss Gold said is true.” Sain held out his left hand; in his palm was a silver, ring-shaped seal. He shook his head at it, a wry smile on his face. “See? It’s broken.”

“...What’s going on? How did you manage to break two in the span of a few days?”

“It’s not because they were faulty, I can tell you that much. Anyway, don’t worry about the seal. I can just ask the headmaster for another replacement. Now, back to the firepower issue. I think we’ll be fine, actually. How smoothly things will go probably depends on how much work you put in, but making it back out in one piece shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Well, if you say so.”

“It might be because of the broken seal, but I caught a glimpse of Miss Gold’s power earlier. I wasn’t able to fully identify it, but she’s definitely from the Clan of Light. My guess is that, because she has an extremely unique power, she hasn’t figured out what it is.”

“...And are you going to help her figure it out?”

Seeing that Sain had fallen silent, she continued.

“Master Sain, do you remember what you told me when we left Lightridge? You told me that my job was to keep an eye on you, and to do everything in my power to stop you if you ever strayed from your path. Miss Alicia’s power... It’s not the kind of thing a normal person would notice she had, right? If you’re not careful about what you say, you’re going to blow your cover.”

“...I know.”

If Sain’s true identity was discovered, his newfound freedom would be greatly restricted. In effect, it would drive a stake through his dream. Melia’s opposition was, in fact, a testament to her loyalty; she was doing exactly what Sain had told her to do.

“It would be sheer arrogance on my part to help her. I’m in no such position right now. Still... She’s my friend, and I want to do something for her. That is my honest wish, and I want to stay true to it.”

Melia rolled her eyes and let out an exhausted sigh, though Sain was certain he’d noticed her lips curl into a smile.

When Alicia returned, she was holding platters of food in her hands. She’d apparently been roped into helping out with everything from kitchen duty to waiting tables.

When the atmosphere eventually settled, the three were finally

able to begin their dinner. A little while later, after Alicia had said her goodbyes, the trio left the diner to take a stroll along the river.

A pleasant evening breeze grazed their cheeks.

"Miss Gold," said Sain, his voice calm, "would you mind showing me some of your light magic?"

The request caught Alicia by surprise. She stared at him for a moment, then turned her eyes to the ground.

"...I don't want to."

"Why?"

"Because I don't! Because..." Her expression grew sad. "You'll just think I'm stupid."

"Miss Gold, do you think my dream is stupid?"

"I..."

"Okay, look at it this way. Like you said, neither of us have very many friends. So... we have to work together. Let me just take a look. Despite my image, I actually know a thing or two about light magic."

Sain's gaze drifted across the river toward the end of his sentence. He didn't notice, but his words had enticed Alicia into a weak smile.

"Do you? Well... I guess, in that case..."

She slowly turned her palm up and, for a while, nothing happened. Sain waited, fully aware she was still struggling to convince herself. Eventually, she made up her mind, and cast a spell.

"Lighto!"

An orange flame appeared. It glowed with the same hue as the "Flagus" she'd shown during her self-introduction. She wasn't lying—even when she cast light magic, it ended up becoming fire magic.

The fireball wavered for a moment before disappearing into the wind.

"Well, that's it... Just like I said, right?" She forced out a dry chuckle; any traces of a smile had faded alongside her flame.

Sain, however, did not reply.

Magic was an aspect of one's individuality. Two people casting the same spell would produce different results. Her "Lighto" did indeed turn into fire, but it didn't simply become a "Flagus." It had too clear of a contour and flashed into existence, almost as though it had been there all along. In addition to that, the flame's luminance was subdued, and it was dense at the center.

In general, fire magic was best described by the word "intense." It was inherently an aggressive type of magic. Alicia's flame, however, was different. It blazed with a firm but tranquil light that almost seemed to shield her with its glow.

"Allow me to give you one piece of advice: Don't spend any more time on light magic. Stop focusing on it."

"...What?"

Alicia glared at him, clearly misinterpreting his meaning. He re-explained, still speaking calmly.

"I'm not telling you to give up on light magic altogether. However, at your current stage, it's meaningless to obsess over it any further. Master your fire magic first. Once you do, your talents will truly come to fruition."

"...How can you possibly know that?"

Sain shrugged.

"Maybe I don't. Who knows? I'm just a student, after all. Believe me or don't, it's your choice."

He shot Melia a glance that seemed to say, "Is this careful enough for you?"

She replied in kind, adding a small gesture that Sain read as, "Sure. Feel better now, nice guy?"

His response was a quick grin.

Meanwhile, Alicia was staring at her own hands as if trying to see through them. They were empty now, devoid of even her own light, but his words were still fresh in her mind—that something greater might lie hidden within. For now, she simply had to believe.

"All right. I believe you." She closed her hands in a small show of resolve. "I don't care how unlikely it is. If the possibility exists, I'll go for it."

She met the two with a smile that was different from before; this time, her eyes were brimming with confidence.

Sain felt a rush of gratitude surge from his chest. It was truly a stroke of fortune that their paths had crossed.

+ + +

It was the first weekend since school had started. On weekdays, students had classes, which was a significant drain on both time and stamina. Weekends were therefore preferable for exploring labyrinths.

Sain and Melia headed to the main school building where they had arranged to meet Alicia.

"Ah, Miss Gold. Were you waiting long?"

The girl turned around at the sound of his voice, her golden locks trailing in an elegant wave behind her. As soon as she saw them, however, the warm smile on her face froze.

"Wh-What the heck are you wearing, Sain?!" she blurted out, wide-eyed with shock.

Compared to the previous day, Sain's appearance had changed in two ways. The first was his sword, which he now wore on his waist. The pitch-black blade resting in an equally dark sheath swallowed the sun's rays like a black hole. Alicia knew about the sword, though. She had, after all, been at the store yesterday when they bought it.

The cause of her reaction was the second change. From head to toe—neck, wrists, fingers, ankles, even on the front of his coat—Sain was covered in thick chains. In addition to that, his accessories had increased in both size and number. He'd already jangled like a pouch of coins everywhere he walked, and now he jangled like three.

"Heh. What does it look like I'm wearing?"

"Um... Chains, I'm pretty sure? Like that one going down across your chest."

"Exactly. And what are chains used for? Restraining untamed beasts. The rest, I assume, is self-explanatory."

"You assumed wrong." Alicia turned to Melia. "Translation, please?"

"Master Sain's into bondage."

"N-No no no! What're you talking about?! I don't have a crazy fetish like that!" Sain shook his head in fervent dismissal. "Damn it, maid! Everything I just said was true, wasn't it?"

"Well. Technically yes, I suppose."

Untamed beasts aside, the restraining part was indeed accurate.

"Look, we're exploring the labyrinth today, right? So I'm wearing sturdier gear than usual. Nothing out of the ordinary about that, right?"

"I don't know what *is* ordinary about you to begin with..."

It would be a serious problem if his broken seal streak followed him into the labyrinth, so, as a precaution, he'd prepared an even sturdier set of seals.

"Also, those look pretty heavy. Can you even fight in those with your E-rank stamina?"

"Hah. Let me put your concerns to rest. So long as I have this power... Th-This... power... Hnnnnnngh!"

A series of uncomfortable, constipated grunts followed as Sain strained to demonstrate his power. His breathing grew ragged, and sweat began to bead on his forehead. Eventually, he managed to produce a bolt of darkness in his palm. It was no larger than his thumb.

"Haaa... Haaa... Haaa... Phew. So... As I was saying... I have... this power."

"...Should I just assume you're going to be completely useless?"

"No! I told you I'll be useful, and I will be!"

The two girls rolled their eyes at him, but neither bothered to voice any further doubts. They had both spent enough time around him to know it would likely be futile.

"Anyway, let's go get permission from the headmaster first."

The labyrinth was home to all sorts of deadly hazards that could be fatal for the unprepared. In order to ensure students did not expose

themselves to excessive danger, they had to first obtain permission from the headmaster.

It was true that the excessively competitive environment fostered by Jenifa Royal Magic Academy bordered on the precarious, but conflating this with a disregard for student well-being would be a misunderstanding. In fact, the reality was quite the opposite. For each group of students who wished to enter the labyrinth, the headmaster would personally gauge their readiness.

Public opinion was split on the system; detractors argued it was an administrative annoyance, while supporters saw it as a necessary peace of mind.

In the main building, at the top of a flight of stairs, they came to the headmaster's office.

"Excuse me," Alicia called before opening the door. "My name's Alicia Remia. I'd like to receive permission to explore the labyrinth, please."

"Oh ho ho, how diligent. The school year has barely begun and you're already— Hooooooh?! S-Sir Kni—"

"Gaaaaaaaah! Headmaster!"

"Hoooh?! S-Sain! I meant Sain! That was your name! Oh ho ho, it looks like my memory is still as sharp as ever!"

The two forced a hearty laugh, discreetly wiping the sheen of cold sweat from their foreheads. Had Sain not jumped in mid-sentence, their peaceful relationship as student and headmaster would have come to an abrupt end.

"Now, permission for the labyrinth, was it?"

"Yes! Please!"

Alicia's brimming enthusiasm was met with an unexpected frown from the headmaster.

"Hm... And you are requesting permission for... the three of you?"

"Yes!"

"Then no."

"Thank you very— Huh?"

The headmaster's cadence was so natural it took Alicia a moment to realize she'd been denied.

"Wh-Why?!"

She lunged forward, slamming both hands down on the table. Her outburst, however, elicited no reaction from the headmaster, who continued speaking with a frown.

"Alicia, you've been a student at this academy since the junior division. You must know, then, that, in addition to my permission, there is one other item that is required before one can head into the labyrinth."

The question seemed to perplex the young girl, who directed the

headmaster a strange look before responding.

“You need a will.”

“That is correct. Every student who enters the labyrinth must write and submit a will. Therefore, giving you all permission would require I made you *all* write a will...” He paused and waved Sain to his side, then whispered: “And my head is going to roll if I make you write a will.”

“Hm. I see we both have our difficulties.”

“We do indeed, so I’d appreciate if you were a tad more considerate about such things.”

The headmaster let out a deep sigh and slumped back in his chair.

“I see. My apologies. Regardless, though, I have to enter that labyrinth. If you need a will, then I can write one right now.”

“But—”

“This is why I left my homeland in the first place. To do this. Besides, do you really think it won’t be a problem down the road if I’m the only one who keeps getting denied permission? It’s a rock now or a hard place later. Might as well bite down and get it over with.”

“Hnnnnngh, there are procedures you’re supposed to follow... But fine. I’ll give you permission.”

“Yay! We got permission, Sain!”

“Indeed. Our headmaster is a man who can be reasoned with. Henceforth, I shall refer to him as ‘His Wise Majesty King Kaiser of the Academy.’”

“Please don’t,” grumbled the old man. “I *would* appreciate it, however, if you explained to me what you plan to do in there. Why the rush?”

“Certainly! We want to find the holy sword!”

“The holy sword? And... you’re going along with this, Sain?”

The headmaster was understandably perplexed, as Sain was the last person he would expect to be looking for holy swords. After all, he could make them on demand.

“What *I’m* looking for is a doom sword, but I’m also curious about these man-made holy swords.”

It seemed likely to Sain that only holy swords that were man-made to begin with could be reforged into doom swords. The blessing of the goddess, while a potent power, was not something a blacksmith could work with.

“That’s a rather odd thing to be curious about... Oh well.” The headmaster spoke in a conciliatory tone as he pulled three sets of documents from his drawer and placed them on the table. “Anyway, sign here.”

The large “Will” spelled out at the top of the page made the purpose of the documents clear. Alicia seemed completely unfazed,

and immediately began filling out the form. Sain, however, hesitated.

"It's all right. If things get really dicey, I'll protect you," Melia reassured him.

"...Not exactly the most encouraging statement, but thanks. I needed that kick up the backside. After all, I'm your master. I can't be getting cold feet here."

Encouraged by his attendant's perfect composure in the face of potentially great risk to life and limb, Sain picked up his pen as well.

A few minutes later, all three had completed their wills.

"Hm. Fair enough. The completion of your wills has been duly noted. Now, take these." After accepting the documents, the headmaster handed them their labyrinth permits. "Ensure they are not passed to others. They must remain in your possession and your possession alone."

"Mm. Understood."

Just as they were about to leave, Sain heard the headmaster call his name.

"Sain, a moment please."

"What is it, King Kaiser?"

"Let's stick with 'headmaster' for now, all right? Listen... Don't go too crazy in there, okay? I need that labyrinth for classes, and the budget can't really handle a round of extensive repairs."

Sain turned his head just enough to allow the headmaster a glimpse of his sharp gaze.

"Well... That's up to them."

And then he pulled the door closed behind him. It was, he thought, a perfectly executed exit. He'd just achieved the epitome of coolness and spent a moment basking in his own glory.

"Who's 'them'?"

"Who cares? Whatever happens, it's not like Sain can do anything about it anyway."

"Would you just let me have my moment? Ugh! Come on, let's go," he groaned, stomping off in a childish fit of annoyance.

Once the girls had finished mercilessly raining on Sain's parade, the trio left the school building and made their way to a structure at the corner of the grounds.

The interior was a wide-open space, devoid of any furniture. It contained nothing except a series of three-dimensional magic circles which sat in the center, bathing the room in a soft, pink light.

The academy's labyrinth did not physically exist within the academy. While the potential excavation of treasure was an undeniable merit, labyrinths were not devoid of risk—in particular, extended periods of neglect would result in monsters emerging from their depths. As a result, they were rarely found within cities. There

did exist labyrinth towns—communities that developed the area surrounding a labyrinth and primarily concerned themselves with activities related to its exploration—but those were by far the exception rather than the rule. Most places where people lived were purposefully located far away from labyrinths to avoid their potential dangers.

This created a conundrum: The merits of labyrinths necessitated frequent access, but they were often located in places that were difficult to reach. Some were in the middle of deserts. Others were at the bottom of the sea. There were even labyrinths in the sky. And so, in order to provide convenient entry to these locations, people invented a teleportation apparatus known as a “labyrinth gate,” which took the form of a series of magic circles.

“Well then, let’s go,” said Alicia before stepping into the center of the labyrinth gate before them. The permit she’d received from the headmaster reacted with the gate, and its magic circles welcomed her with a faint glow. Then, they began to rotate around her, their light growing stronger with each revolution.

When they finally dimmed, Alicia was gone.

“I’ll go next, then. We can’t have Master Sain taking the lead in something. It just doesn’t feel right.”

“Do you have to say something mean to me every time?! Just go already!”

Melia stuck her tongue out at Sain before hopping into the gate. He scowled back, but couldn’t help but smile after she’d vanished. Her sharp tongue and flippant behavior toward him masked a strong sense of loyalty. Even now, she was scouting ahead for danger at their target location. She was always faithfully and inconspicuously looking out for her master’s interests.

“Now, if she could only give others even a fraction of the attention she gives me, she’d be perfect...”

Melia made every effort to be by his side at all times, so having Alicia go first was probably a part of her plan. Sain, however, wished she would give Alicia an equal amount of concern.

The thought gnawed at him as he walked into the labyrinth gate, but as soon as the magic circles activated, he was forced to push it to the back of his mind.

Something felt wrong.

The strength of his seals meant he currently had no way of fighting enemies or even protecting himself—he was quite literally powerless.

But this didn’t mean he was helpless. The seals did not dull his instincts. Forged through years of experience and countless brushes with life-threatening danger, those instincts were currently screaming

at him to be careful. He knew in his gut that something wasn't right.

"Geez! What took you so long?" shouted an impatient Alicia as he stepped out of the teleporter. In his effort to investigate the cause of the strange sensation, he'd resisted the effects of the gate, which ended up delaying his arrival.

He could feel the sensation of soft vegetation underfoot, and before him stretched a vast expanse of grassy plains dotted with hills.

He'd heard that the gate would bring them to a hilly area in a different continent, and it appeared to be true. While it should have been early morning in Loribania, it was high noon here in these hills. The sun shone brightly overhead, imparting a golden lustre on the land and sky.

"I know I've seen it before," Alicia remarked as she gazed up at the structure before them, "but it sure is big."

A massive tower loomed over the hills, rising into the clouds like a gray pillar that held up the sky.

This was the labyrinth they were going to explore, and, being owned by the academy, it was meant for beginners. Considering its already-imposing appearance, one could only imagine what labyrinths for veterans looked like. There was something about things that were big—very big—that spoke to humans on a very basic level. Sheer size alone was enough to strike awe into the hearts of beholders.

But Sain's intense forward gaze was not one of awe. His eyes narrowed. *Something* was there. He had felt its presence.

"Miss Gold, when you teleported here, did you feel anything?"

"Huh? No, not really."

"...And you, my maid? Did you feel anything?"

"Hmm. There was a bit of a tingle."

His gut was right. There was indeed something there—something that didn't belong. He sighed with frustration, lamenting how bad his luck was. Even after leaving his kingdom and coming all this way, he wasn't free; his troubles had followed him here.

"Master Sain, is that what I think it is?"

"I think the odds are pretty good."

After confirming Melia's suspicions, he turned to Alicia.

"Miss Gold, before we begin exploring, there is something I need to warn you about."

"Wh-What?"

The sudden change in his tone caught Alicia off guard. Realizing he was serious, her expression sobered as well as she awaited his next words.

"If you ever see a monster the deep red of blood... *Run.*"

Chapter 3: The Origin Spire

Hidden within the walls of the gray tower reaching into the heavens were treasures, traps, and deadly monsters. Those from Jenifa Royal Magic Academy referred to it as “the school labyrinth,” but among explorers, it had a different name: The Origin Spire.

It was quite possibly the first labyrinth to be discovered, making it a point of origin in the shared history of humans and labyrinths. As a result, it had been fully traversed and its secrets laid bare. As of now, the Origin Spire was under state supervision and officially recognized as a valuable site for both training and the collection of monster resources.

Upon entering, Sain’s group found the inside to be chilly and dimly lit. They made their way upward, venturing deeper into the tower. The lower levels near the entrance were garden-variety mazes, with each level partitioned into complicated systems of rooms and pathways by thick walls of stone. Occasionally they would come across conduits carrying water, but their source and destination remained a mystery.

“Huh. There’s nothing here. This place is completely empty,” said Sain, his eyes scanning the surroundings.

“Well, we’re walking down the so-called common route, so there are always people coming through here. Those who came before us probably cleaned the place up already. Still, keep your guard up. As soon as we go a little deeper, there’ll be plenty of monsters waiting for us.”

“O-Of course. I knew that. I was just curious.”

Sain wasn’t bluffing—he did already know this, but his mind was becoming increasingly scattered. The seals around his neck and coat became uncomfortably distracting—a perpetual reminder of his weakened state—and he noticed his eyes being subconsciously drawn to them from time to time. Each time he looked down, his stomach churned with a fresh pang of anxiety. This was, however, something he’d resolved to do, and he had no intention of turning back. Willing his nerves to calm down, he pressed on.

“There! Monsters!”

Alicia stopped and gestured forward. There were three figures in their path, two of which were humanoid. The last was on all fours—likely a beast of some kind. Not one reached above Sain’s waist in

height.

“Two goblins and... that looks like a hound dog.”

Goblins were child-sized monsters with green skin and pronounced bony frames. Even with their reduced stature, they were strong enough to rival an adult human male.

The two ahead held wooden clubs, and stood glowering at Sain's group. The hound dog to their side had ruffled up its gray fur and salivated menacingly through bared teeth.

“How convenient. This is a good opportunity to figure out what each of us are capable of,” said Alicia. “Don't kill them immediately, okay? We need our training dummies alive. I'll go first.”

She stepped forward and regarded her targets. Then, she cast her spell.

“Flagus!”

Pebble-sized bolts of fire shot toward the monsters, searing the air around them, each one erupting into a cloud of flame the moment they struck. The goblins screeched with pain as their silhouettes were engulfed by the blaze. The hound dog, however, had managed to dodge the volley of missiles.

“Ah, I missed one. Take this, then. *Flagus!*”

She mercilessly showered her enemies with another round of fire bolts. This time, the hound dog was not so lucky.

“Wow. That's so... sloppy.”

“Oh, shut up. Just throw enough attacks at them and it'll be fine,” Alicia retorted with a scowl.

Sain didn't offer a response. Instead, he put a contemplative hand to his chin.

Alicia was telling the truth; her magic was actually effective against monsters. He glanced at Melia and perceived a hint of relief in her expression. She was probably pleased to discover that Alicia could indeed be relied on for firepower.

The monsters' squeals of agony soon turned to roars of anger. They rushed toward Sain's group, eyes burning with rage.

“I'll go next, then.”

Melia stepped forward and held her hands out toward the oncoming monsters.

“Sprites of crystalline veil, roam the endless mist—Londo Mysteria!”

Flames spewed from her right hand and water from her left. They danced and twirled, red mixing with blue, before dispersing into a thick mist. The white haze moved as if carried by wind and soon enveloped the monsters. Even then, it continued to expand, its wispy tendrils reaching all the way to Sain.

“No way... This is... compound magic?”

“Indeed. My maid has a particular knack for it.”

Compound magic was special in that it was only usable by fivekind. As its name suggested, it involved mixing several elements in a delicate balance. Lightkind and darkkind were both restricted in aptitude to their respective elements, making fine control of other elements impossible. They were therefore unable to perform compound magic.

In contrast to Alicia's astonishment, Melia controlled the mist as if it were the simplest task in the world. Technical mastery, however, could not elevate the spell beyond its inherent limits; it was ultimately a distraction, and the monsters were very unlikely to be killed by fog inhalation.

They continued their furious charge through the mist and eventually broke through. Before they could catch a glimpse of Sain, however, Melia continued her incantation.

"Points of origin, spin in reverse, encircle!"

The mist redirected its movement, cascading toward the monsters and once again swallowing them. Sain almost pitied their opponents as he watched them struggle to escape its clutches, only to be repeatedly dragged back into its swirling embrace. Shrieks of frustration and fury, grating and high-pitched, echoed from within the murky shroud as the monsters thrashed about blindly.

"And a continuous incantation, too... You realize you can probably count on one hand the number of people in our division who can do that, right? Like, I could tell during the proficiency assessment that Melia was really good, but this... She's miles ahead of everyone else."

Alicia spoke with unmistakable awe in her voice, but Sain could tell it was also tinged with some regret and envy. The two watched as Melia walked into the cloud of mist, her steps gliding and graceful. She swiftly drew a dagger and held it toward the monsters.

"And this is how I operate. I prefer to keep them distracted, then I walk up and go *chop chop*."

"I see... And while you do that, I'll focus on preparing magic with plenty of firepower. Still, how are you controlling such a complicated spell? Did you go through some sort of special training?"

"Nothing special, but... Let's just say I've done my time in the field."

"Huh... I assume that means we can expect to see some pretty impressive stuff from your master too, right?"

"Oh, absolutely. Push those expectations right up as high as they'll go."

"Hnngh! Stop raising the bar!"

"Okay, enough with the grumbling. Go show us what you can do."

"Here comes the ace. Come on, knock it out of the park."

"Damn it, you two! You never expect anything from me, and now,

the one time I'd rather you didn't..."

Sain stepped forward as well, just as the monsters emerged from the mist. Seething with rage after the harassment they had received at Melia's hands, they fixed their eyes on him in unison and snarled.

A bead of sweat traced the back of his neck. He should be fine. There was no way he'd lose to monsters like these. He was almost, ninety-nine percent, with near-perfect certainty, sure of it.

"W-Well, fine! Just watch me, then! I'm improving every day, too! Take this! *Darku!*"

He pushed back the tail of his coat in an exaggerated motion with one hand, and a ball of darkness appeared in the other. He shot it toward the monsters, the black bullet tearing through the air with a shrill whistle.

It hit one of the monsters... only to harmlessly bounce off.

"Pff—"

"D-Don't laugh!" yelled Sain, trying to hide his embarrassment. It was a futile attempt, however; his face had gone beet red.

"Oh, don't make such a big deal out of it. It's not like we expected anything from you to begin with."

"Hnngh... I just need more practice... One day, magic like this will be child's play..."

"At least you've got us. If we had to rely on your wimpy little spell, we'd be in serious trouble."

"Don't call it wimpy!"

Sain flailed his arms around in protest but failed to garner any attention from the girls.

"Anyway, I think we're done with these monsters. Time to finish the job. *Flagus!*"

This time, she used the full extent of her power. The bolts of fire immediately reduced the monsters to smoldering carcasses.

"Okay. Let's keep our formation and move forward," Alicia instructed.

"You're not going to scavenge them for materials?"

"Our only goal this time is the holy sword. More baggage will just weigh us down and make us less able to react quickly if something happens. Let's save the money-making for next time."

Sain and Melia nodded in agreement, and the three took up their positions in the formation. Sain led the group, Melia closely following a few steps behind, and Alicia brought up the rear.

"Miss Gold, are we heading toward this place marked on the map?"

"Yeah."

"Understood. Hm... It's still pretty far. Should we slow down and pace ourselves?"

“...You have a point. I think we should.”

Alicia nodded but then gave Sain a weird look.

“You know, labyrinth maps aren’t the easiest things to read.

Usually, it takes some time to figure them out, but... you two act like you’ve been reading these your whole lives. Wasn’t this supposed to be your first time exploring a labyrinth?”

“This is our first time exploring a labyrinth *properly*. We’ve actually been inside them quite a few times before.”

“How were you exploring them before?”

“Hm. Let’s just say I paired up with someone who was ridiculously strong, and when monsters showed up, I let that person do all the hard work. In hindsight, it might not have been the fairest division of labor.”

“Well, fairness depends on the situation. People explore labyrinths for all sorts of reasons, after all. Researchers just hire a bunch of strong guards, for example, and spend all their time poking at things that interest them. In the long run, though... It’s probably better if all of us could pull our weight in battle.”

While the two girls chatted, Sain kept pressing forward until he came to a turn in the path. He stopped, peeked around the corner, and then turned back to his friends.

“Enemies up ahead. Four goblins. They’re each holding some sort of weapon. Probably clubs.”

“Got it. How far are they?”

“About ten meters. They haven’t noticed us, but they’re coming closer... It’s a long and narrow passage up ahead. Miss Gold, can you wipe them out with your magic?”

“Sure. Just tell me when to attack.”

Alicia began concentrating fire magic in her palm in preparation.

“Now!”

As soon as Sain gave the signal, she leapt around the corner and faced her palm toward the monsters.

“*Velle Flaram!*”

The goblins barely had time to process what was happening before they were swallowed by a surging wave of fire. The flames spanned the width of the passageway, consuming all in their path.

“I wish I had that kind of firepower,” said Sain, evidently impressed.

“Only works on monsters, though,” Alicia answered with a shrug, but Sain saw the smile on her lips before she turned away.

+ + +

Their progression through the labyrinth continued smoothly.

“*Londo Mysteria!*”

“Flare!”

Melia focused on stopping the monsters in their path from moving, sometimes by distracting them and sometimes by disabling them.

She summoned a stream of water which she whipped around the monsters' legs. Once they had lost their footing, Alicia stepped in with the firepower. As raining flames burned the monsters to a cinder, the trio's fifth battle drew to a close.

“Phew. That's it for this place. Let's move on.”

Several hours had passed since they entered the labyrinth, and in this time they had climbed over twenty floors. Though they weren't walking particularly fast, their familiarity with labyrinth maps meant they could traverse each floor without ever getting lost, allowing them to progress at a relatively quick pace.

“You know, I'm starting to tire of all these battles,” said Alicia as they walked.

“Agreed. It'd also be a problem if we got spellsick. I suggest we focus on escaping encounters from here on.”

Wary of the toll repeated combat would take on them, Melia offered some sound advice.

The use of magic involved using one's will to gather the ambient magical energy from their surroundings and modify its flow. During this process, the energy had to pass through the user's body. If too much magic passed through in too short a space of time, a phenomenon known as spellsickness would occur, in which the user would experience symptoms similar to mental fatigue. Those afflicted could lose their ability to think and, in severe cases, their consciousness.

“Hah. I suppose that means it's my time to shine now,” said Sain with a flourish.

Two pairs of tired eyes looked at him.

“No. You're useless in a fight, so just go back to doing whatever you were doing.”

“Why?! I can help, even with—”

“Yeah, you said that last time. And then you almost died.”

“One more time! Just let me try one more time! I'll just take the first shot—please!”

“No means no! Stop making me repeat myself!”

Sain's attempts at combat had consisted of a series of failed darkness spells, each of which was promptly followed by panicked screaming as the monster closed in on him.

He never quite seemed to learn, though, and would try again with each new encounter.

Alicia sighed and then opened her mouth to speak, but before any

words could pass her lips, Sain gestured at her.

“Monsters! They’re close!”

“All right. There’s not enough distance for us to run. Melia, stop them!”

“Okay. *Spirits of turbid water, grasp what you seek—Worta Halden!*”

At Melia’s command, arms of water surged toward their enemies. Empowered by her incantation, each watery limb branched into even more arms, each one wrapping its hands around the monsters’ legs. The water was viscous, making it impossible for the ensnared creatures to move.

“*Pierce with flame—Flagus!*”

Alicia’s fire bolts slammed into the labyrinth walls, one after another. By the third shot, a prominent crack had started to form. On the tenth, the walls collapsed entirely, burying the monsters under a pile of rubble.

She squinted at the plume of sandy dust, straining to ascertain the outcome of her attack.

All of a sudden, something gleamed. By the time she realized it was a pair of eyes, it was already too late. The monster leapt past her and nimbly kicked off the wall, landing behind Melia.

“Melia! Behind you!” she screamed, an overwhelming sense of panic surging through her.

“I’ve got it,” she responded in her usual tepid manner, pulling a dagger from her skirt.

The whip monkey, named so because of its whip-like tail, pounced at Melia.

“Hngh!”

She twirled with a quick grunt. There was a flash, and the whip monkey fell to the ground with a long gash across its torso.

“...You’re no slouch with a blade either, are you?”

“Martial mastery is but a part of maidly conduct.”

With the monsters gone, the three climbed over the rubble and came to another passageway, which led to the location marked on their map. As they reached its end, they came to a small room.

“This is our destination? I don’t see anything here...”

“It’s okay. Just watch.”

Upon entering the room, Alicia ran her hands along the walls in a practiced motion. There was a sound, and a part of the wall sank inward to reveal a hidden room.

Inside, a faint disc spread across the floor.

“Get on.”

They followed Alicia’s orders and, almost instantly, the disc began to glow a cold blue. It then rose off the ground, continuing upward before eventually slowing to a halt. A new door had appeared on the

wall in front of them.

"Where are we?" Sain asked, stepping through somewhat cautiously.

They were in an expansive space with no monsters—or even walls—in sight, encircled by a glass-like barrier that was similar in appearance to a long, continuous window. This floor, unlike all the previous ones, seemed to be shaped like an observation deck.

"This is the labyrinth's central area. Phew, I'm spent..."

"A safe zone, I see. This is the first time I've seen one so big..."

A glance around the space revealed a number of people dressed in the academy's uniform. There were also a couple of men who looked to be mercenaries, along with a few ladies who seemed just a tad too old to be students.

"Is this place open to outside explorers as well?"

"Yeah. You have to pay an entrance fee if you're not from the academy though."

The presence of outsiders meant they might eventually run into professional explorers, some of who might know something about the power of the dark knight. Meeting them would be an invaluable opportunity for Sain to gain some information.

"Hey, look, it's them," said someone in the room. "The F-rank sucker and the Sham of Light."

"Birds of a feather, huh? I guess losers are just drawn to other losers."

It was an unpleasant conversation to overhear. Each of their expressions darkened, but the three kept their silence.

"I hear the maid is crazy talented. Hah... Couple of parasites."

"Look at them, just strolling through the labyrinth. Do they think this is some kinda game?"

"Let's get outta here. Just seeing them makes me wanna retch."

As they watched the offending group move away, Alicia bit into her lip.

"People say the worst things sometimes..."

When she received no response from Sain, she looked in his direction. To her surprise, he wore a subdued expression.

"Sain?"

"...They were simply speaking the truth." A shadow fell over his face. "At least, what they said about me was true. Right now, I'm nothing but a loser."

Various emotions swirled within him; he wasn't sure how he felt. All his life, he'd been living in a bubble of reverence. People everywhere, faceless and nameless to him, showered him with praise. Now, there were people who understood him. People who knew him as he truly was...

And they spoke of him with words of spite and malice.

"I'm glad people are seeing my true self, but... the truth sure is harsh."

"Wow, what's with the sudden negativity? The last time I said you looked weak, you almost went rabid on me."

"You said I *looked* weak. They said I *am* weak. There's a difference."

"...What? So a harsh attack on who you are as a person is fair game, but a harmless joke about your get-up and you completely freak out?"

"Of course! Do you have any idea how long I spend every morning doing my— Uh."

"Doing your *what*?"

"U-Um, never mind. I was born like this. This ominous appearance of mine is completely natural."

"Sure it is."

Alicia rolled her eyes and received an immediate scowl from Sain.

"In any case, I'm fine. Their words didn't hurt me. In fact, I agree with their assessment, so—" Sain glanced at Melia, who was sitting formally on her legs with her hands resting on her lap. "Uh, maid? Could you maybe stop glaring like you're about to bite somebody?"

He'd spent more than enough time with Melia to know what kind of emotions were swirling beneath that icy look of hers.

"Huh? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Melia gave him the fakest, most exaggerated smile he'd seen in a while. He sighed and shook his head.

"Okay, let's not get caught up in that. We should figure out what we're doing next."

At Alicia's prompting, the three agreed to move on from the unpleasant topic.

"So, about the holy sword," she continued. "As a matter of fact, I have a pretty good idea where it might be. It's actually pretty simple when you think about it. Remember how I said this labyrinth is accessible to outsiders? Holy swords are generally under strict supervision, whether that's by a kingdom or a domain. I'd imagine the academy wouldn't want its holy sword being nabbed by some random outsider. In other words, it has to be somewhere that only students can get to."

"I see." Melia pondered over her words. "I wonder if anything is different about the labyrinth map we got from the academy compared to the ones you can get outside? If so, then that's probably our answer."

"I checked. Unfortunately, there weren't any."

"In that case... There must be some sort of mechanism. Maybe a

room that can't be entered unless you're a student like us?"

Alicia nodded.

"That's what I'm betting on too. The thing is, the light-magic-enhancing holy sword we're looking for might be new, but the other holy and doom swords in this labyrinth have been here for years. If there's a room that can't be entered, it would have been discovered a long time ago, but I've never heard any rumors like that. Which means..."

"It's not a room that only students can enter, but a room that only students can find."

Alicia nodded again.

"That gives us a clue where to explore. The key to reaching the holy sword has to be something closely tied to our identity as students. Something like... our student cards, for example," she said in a deductive tone.

"...Seems like it's worth a try."

"Right? Right?" Seeing her reasoning affirmed, Alicia perked up immediately. "The question now is how we're going to find the right location. It's not very realistic for us to comb the whole labyrinth."

"How about using a detection spell?"

"It'd be great if we could. Do you know how?"

"Hah. What a foolish question," Sain interjected, crossing his arms. "Of course I can't."

"You know, that really isn't something you should be proud of..."

He was at least telling the truth. That was, perhaps, something to be proud of.

"My maid can, though." He turned to Melia. "Maid, can you use a detection spell to find locations that respond to student cards?"

"I sure can."

Melia closed her eyes and focused.

"Tears in resonance, flow to your beloved, link with water—Caul Larum!"

A single drop of water fell from the tip of Melia's finger, landing on one of the student cards with a small splash. A ripple spread across its surface, expanded into the air, and then passed into the walls and floor. If Alicia's reasoning was correct, there should be some sort of reaction.

After maybe half a minute, another ripple came back.

"Found it."

Alicia pumped her fist. The ripple had brought with it their first glimpse of light at the end of a long tunnel.

The detection spell pointed them to a floor below the safe zone—namely one they had skipped when Alicia activated the elevator.

"And... the forty-seventh floor," Sain counted as he reached the

bottom of a flight of stairs. “Miss Gold, there appears to be a rather large room on this floor.”

“Yeah. It’s the training room.”

“Training room?”

“That’s what students call it, anyway. It’s a huge area and all sorts of monsters appear there, making it perfect for training—that’s what I’ve heard, at least. Some people even bring a ton of food and just camp out there for a bunch of days straight.”

“So you haven’t used the room before?”

“The name was coined by those in the senior division. It’s still too early for us to be training there. The stairs leading down are at the far end of this floor, though; on the other side of the training room... It’d be faster if we just ran straight through.”

Sain glanced at the map. Going around the large room did indeed seem time-consuming.

“How big is it, exactly?” asked Melia.

“About as big as the school grounds.”

Sain frowned.

“...That’s pretty big. If we’re spotted in there, we won’t be able to get away.”

The girls nodded, suggesting they shared the same concern.

“In any case, let’s go take a look first.”

There was more to their trip than just getting their hands on a holy (or a doom) sword; they then had to navigate their way back through the labyrinth. This meant conserving stamina was a priority.

Once they arrived at the large room, Sain took a peek inside.

“Sain? How does it look?” Alicia inquired.

“...I don’t see any monsters. It’s probably safe.”

Alicia furrowed her brow, skeptical, but followed him in regardless.

The room wasn’t as large as the safe zone on the fiftieth floor, but its size did indeed rival the school grounds. Despite this, however, it was almost devoid of monsters.

“...Looks like someone already cleaned this place up. Lucky us.”

“Still... Was it really necessary to be so thorough?” Melia pondered.

“Whoever came here before us must have been quite the monster themselves. Whoa, careful. There are still a few left,” warned Alicia.

Immediately, their expressions grew tense.

They were over forty floors up, and the monsters here were incomparably stronger than the ones they had encountered so far. A hobgoblin—a superior form of the goblin species—paced around the center of the room. They were both larger in size and more intelligent than the average goblin, making them truly dangerous enemies. And,

to make matters worse, it wasn't alone. Flying near the ceiling above it was an evil eye—a large eyeball the size of a human skull with black wings sprouting from its sides. Neither would be easy to deal with.

Sain's group took a moment to consider their options, when—
“Huh—?”

There was a spectacular flash, and the three looked up just in time to see both monsters impaled by an enormous spear of light.

Before they could even begin to strategize, the situation had been resolved.

“What just...” Alicia spoke under her breath, her eyes fixed on the two now-unmoving forms on the ground.

Sain and Melia wore similar looks of surprise.

“That was light magic, wasn't it?” Melia asked him.

“Yes... And very advanced light magic, at that.”

The spell they just witnessed was not only immensely powerful, but terrifyingly efficient. It was the magical equivalent of a finely-honed blade. Every shred of energy had been focused into its one, singular goal—to obliterate its targets. Its sheer perfection would have elicited gasps of awe from even the gods themselves.

Sain felt his hand twitch. He knew this power; knew it so well that he was overcome with a sense of *déjà vu*. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't his own.

“Who are you?”

The abrupt voice sounded as though it were only a few paces away. He blinked in surprise, and, all of a sudden, there was a swordswoman standing in front of him. Alicia was wide-eyed as well.

Only Melia seemed to have sensed the woman's approach, and her right hand was already hovering over her daggers.

“You're... the vice president, I believe?” said Sain, recalling the faces he had seen during his interview.

Her intimidating aura seemed to both contradict and accentuate her striking appearance. Long, blue hair flowed down her shoulders; her amber eyes glowed, her gaze as sharp as a sword; fine brows traced graceful arcs leading down to her shapely nose; and her fair skin shimmered like freshly settled snow. A cultured air exuded from her as she stood, as if her very presence was a work of art.

A sudden, sharp pain shot up Sain's leg.

“Ow! What the— What was that for?!”

“Gawking penalty.”

“G-Gawking?! I-I wasn't... Ow, damn it, maid. My ankle...”

Their makeshift slapstick eased the tension between them. The vice president, Emilia, softened her demeanor as well. She looked over each of them with the gaze of an inspector before speaking.

"It's been a few days since we met. I remember you three well."

"I'm honored to have left an impression, then. Are you here to explore the labyrinth as well?"

"No. We're here for training. Rather, *he* is. I'm simply accompanying him," Emilia said, gesturing behind her to where a blond-haired young man stood.

"Alicia Remia. Who'd have thought I'd find you here? A little far from home, aren't we?" he remarked. He had a gaze so sharp that Alicia could almost feel his golden eyes piercing through her.

In his time, Sain had encountered his fair share of powerful individuals; those who draped themselves in wealth, and who basked in their influence and authority. He knew their aura well, which was why he could tell the boy standing before him was in every way their equal.

In fact, "equal" might have been putting it mildly. There was a certain gravitas to him that suggested he was in a league of his own.

The young man standing before them was Cain Theresia, student council president and undisputed top of his grade. If the intermediate division were a kingdom, he would be seated on its throne. And, for some reason, he was staring at Alicia with contempt.

"...That's none of your business."

"Excuse me? It is my business, because you, like me, belong to the Clan of Light." Cain's expression grew more serious. "You've been called a disgrace to the clan, and yet you still cling to this academy. Look, just take my advice. *Leave*. A life without magic suits you better."

"That's up to me to decide. Just get off my case already..."

"You're in over your head. This place isn't for you." His eyes flitted to Melia. "Chances are, you had to rely on Sain Fostess's attendant to even make it this far."

Anger flared in Alicia's eyes, but she ultimately bit her lip and turned away in frustration.

"Now hold on a minute. I just heard something that I can't let slide."

She looked back to find that Sain had stepped between them.

"While it's true my maid is a force to be reckoned with, we couldn't have made it here with her efforts alone. We owe just as much to Miss Gold's power. She's a valuable member of our party right now, and her presence is absolutely indispensable."

"Sain..."

"Are you saying that Miss Gold is even less competent than me? Do you even know what I scored on the physical and magical assessments? E and F, respectively, thank you very much! And you think she's worse than me?" Sain spoke with an unbridled confidence

clearly unbefitting the words that had passed his lips.

“Well, so much for that. And it started so well, too...” Melia muttered under her breath, punctuating her exhaustion with a shake of her head.

“Whether she’s competent or not is irrelevant; I won’t fault her for who she is. And whether she chooses to follow her talents or her desires is her decision to make. But when her decision has negative consequences on others, then I must intervene.”

“What do you mean?”

“We belong to the Clan of Light, and the Remias are descendents of the Theresia family.”

Sain raised an eyebrow at Alicia, who nodded in response.

“My great uncle—that is, her grandfather—had a child with a darkkind. Though our two families have been separated ever since, we remain bound by blood. When her grandfather diluted his noble lineage through his union with a non-lightkind, he doomed the Remias to their current fate.

“As I understand it, their bloodline is in crisis, and yet she still insists on flaunting her fire magic in the public eye. Fake fire magic though it may be, it looks real enough to the people who see it. And therein lies the problem. She might as well be announcing the decline of her clan.”

Cain paused to let out a pained sigh before continuing.

“Fortunately, you’re recognized as lightkind in the official records. You’re notorious enough already, so for the sake of restoring our clan, would you please stop drawing more attention to yourself? No one asked you to be here, and your efforts aren’t doing anyone any favors.”

Sain took a moment to process what he had just heard. To put it simply: Cain and Alicia were second cousins, with Cain being higher up in the familial pecking order. As her relative, Cain was displeased with the current state of the Remias; they were a branch family, and so their decline reflected poorly on the Theresias as well.

It was true the Remias had at one point mixed a different magical genus into their bloodline, but as long as ensuing spouses were all lightkind, they would eventually restore their status in the clan. Alicia’s fire magic, however, threw a wrench in the works; the more she used fire magic, the more people would assume the Remias had abandoned the clan.

The issue boiled down to a matter of preserving image. From the clan’s perspective, they would much rather have her keep her head down and stay out of sight, all the while making clear she was still lightkind.

Having fully understood what Cain was after, Sain placed his

hands on his hips and grinned.

“In that case, the correct choice for Miss Gold is to keep doing what she’s doing. You see, she is here in this labyrinth precisely because she *does* want to learn how to use light magic. Surely it’s to your benefit to have her using light magic as well? You might think she’s drawing unnecessary attention to herself, but it’s a crucial step in the process.”

“Effort without results is no more than an exercise in futility. If I had a coin for every time I was told, ‘It’s for learning light magic’...”

“Then you’d be rich, *and* she’d know light magic!” quipped Sain, his grin now stretched from ear to ear. Then, his tone turned serious. “So what if you’ve heard it a million times? As long as she means it, you should keep listening. Do you remember our conversation during the interview? You said you expected great things from me. Well, how about you trust me on this, then? Because it’s going to be pretty great.”

There was an edge to his voice as he turned the president’s previous remark against him.

Emilia’s gaze immediately turned hostile and, without missing a beat, Melia’s hand shot to her dagger. She met Emilia’s glare in kind and the two stood in what seemed to be a standoff, looking as though they were ready to pounce at any minute.

The slightest hint of a frown appeared on Cain’s brow.

“Why do you defend Alicia Remia so fervently? What is she to you?”

“Nah-ah-ah. Now that, my friend, is being gauche. Let’s keep this civilized, shall we? The only question that should matter right now is whether or not you’ll trust me.”

In declining to answer, Sain was sending a message. The implication: *Don’t ask why. Just take my word.*

Emilia rolled her eyes at what she believed was a facetious response. Cain, however, smiled.

“Fair enough.”

Emilia wheeled around and gaped at him in shock, but he simply continued.

“During the interview, I sensed a faint trace of something in you. A strong power of some sort. Now, however, I sense nothing at all. I pray it wasn’t a figment of my imagination.”

With that, Cain turned on his heel and walked away. Emilia glowered at them, clearly unsatisfied with how their conversation had concluded, before reluctantly leaving as well.

“He sensed something, huh...”

Sain said nothing else as he watched the two council members leave. He had entered his interview with one of his seals damaged, but

the overall spell should have been mostly still intact. If that slight chink in his magical armor was enough for Cain to sense a fragment of his power, then the president did indeed live up to his name.

Only after their forms had disappeared did he turn around to see a flustered Alicia.

“U-Um. I, uh...” she stammered, her eyes wandering nervously.

He raised an eyebrow.

“That’s not what I expected.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not acting like your usual self. Did you forget your lines or something? Isn’t this where you get all upset at me and yell something to the effect of, ‘I didn’t need your help, you dummy’?”

His playful teasing coaxed a short burst of laughter from Alicia.

“Geez. If the proficiency assessment had a category for sheer nerve, you’d be an A, hands down.”

“Indeed. It is one of my strong points.”

But the apparent recovery in Alicia’s mood was short-lived, and she soon began brooding again.

“Hey, Sain. Tell me something. Why do you believe in me?”

It was clear their exchange with Cain was still on her mind, so Sain didn’t hesitate in answering:

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. We’re two of a kind, Miss Gold. I know the strength of your resolve. I can feel it as if it were my own.”

The sight of Sain proudly declaring their likeness drew a weak laugh from her.

“...Haha, thanks. Well, let’s get a move on, then. No point standing around here.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Alicia directed a smile at him. Only after they started walking did she allow it to fade, revealing the anguish underneath.

It appeared Cain and Emilia’s hunting spree had cleared the room of monsters—at least for the time being—allowing them to quickly run through to the other side. As they reached the exit, Sain checked around for danger once more before pressing forward.

Melia’s detection spell had pointed out a new destination, which was now marked on their map. That was their destination.

“Huh... I’ve never been here before,” Alicia remarked as the trio made their way down a rather strange path.

They had discovered a room hidden behind a stairway, inside of which was a hole that dropped them into a large maze. Here they found a narrow crevice at the bottom edge of a wall, which they crawled through to find yet another new area. They ran into monsters more frequently here, which suggested this new area was yet to be

touched.

“We’re here.”

Melia made her announcement before what appeared to be a dead end. Her detection spell, however, pointed straight at it. Rather, it pointed *through* it.

“This is probably where the student card comes in.”

“How do we use it though?”

“Who knows? Probably just wave it or something.”

Alicia pulled out her student card and began tapping it on the floor and against the walls. Eventually, something she did set off a trigger, and the wall in their path started to glow. Sain watched as light slowly soaked through the stone, revealing the contents hidden beyond.

“Bingo.”

A stately white gate stood before them, a beautiful woman bestowing a sword upon a young man carved into the arch. It clearly led to somewhere special.

“Very clever. I didn’t know you were a puzzle person, Miss Gold.”

“Oh, please. I don’t even remember the last time I thought so hard about something... But my dream is riding on this, so I’m pulling out all the stops. No excuses.”

At the end of the day, Alicia was still a student of a renowned academy, and no amount of hate or derision was going to change the fact she deserved her place. Not only did she have plenty of actual battle experience, she also had the critical thinking skills to back it up.

The gate opened on its own, revealing a new path forward.

“All right! No turning back now. I’m going to find that holy sword one way or another. And, once I do, I’m going to tell that stupid president to take his advice and stuff it,” she proclaimed, marching forward with vigorous steps.

Sain and Melia followed after her. But as soon as they passed the threshold, an array of crimson-colored magic circles flew in from beyond the gate.

“Wha—”

The moment they came into contact with Alicia, the circles spread into a ring around her, spilling an odd crimson light from their peripheries.

She froze in shock, staring wide-eyed at the bewildering sight.

“Oh, god— Grab my hand!” Sain yelled, lunging toward her with an outstretched arm.

Sensing the urgency in his voice, she spun around and reached for his hand. Just before their fingers could touch, the magic circles flashed with a blinding light. When Sain opened his eyes, his hand had grasped thin air. Alicia was gone.

“Damn it! They got us!”

He clenched his fist in frustration. They had become separated. Panic began to rise within him. They had run into a forced teleportation trap—a fairly well-known hazard found in labyrinths that was worth being especially careful of. Their momentary lapse of attention had cost them dearly, and, to make matters worse, this was probably more than just a simple trap.

“Master Sain, was that...?”

“Judging by those magic circles... It definitely was.”

“What should we do?”

There was no time to waste. They had to act *now*. Sain immediately formulated a plan.

“...If I go straight after it, it might just run off. I’ll need to stay put for now.”

“Which means I should be going, then.”

“Sorry to make you do this.”

“It’s no big deal. Plus, I’m worried about Miss Alicia too. I’ll go right now.”

They looked into one another’s eyes in a final show of resolve; so deeply that, in her brown eyes, Sain could make out the gentle blue of his own. A short silence passed between them until, eventually, Sain’s lips moved to speak.

“Godspeed... *Melia*.”

He had spoken her name.

Immediately, a warm current of power coursed through Melia’s body.

“Much obliged.”

Her voice carried the same lazy drawl, but now her eyes blazed with a brilliant golden light.

+ + +

For a long time, Alicia felt as though she were floating. Various sights flashed past in a nauseating blur of colors. She had no idea how she’d gotten here or where she was going.

Then, all of a sudden, she fell.

Almost instinctively, she aimed a fire spell downward.

“Fan of crimson flame, direct the wind, weather the barrage—Vaan Flargo!”

An explosion filled the air directly beneath her. She crossed her arms and braced for impact as a wall of rising wind slammed into her. Though it slowed her descent, she still hit the ground hard.

“Ow! That hurt... Ugh, I’m still terrible at defensive magic...”

After checking herself over, she was relieved to find that the fall had left her bruised but not crippled. Since she couldn’t use any

healing magic, all her limbs being fully functional was definitely good news.

Slowly, she pushed herself up, brushed the sand from her clothes, and looked around.

“What a trip... Where am I, even?”

The last thing she remembered was being captured by the ring of magic circles. She hadn’t tripped or fallen, so it must have been a teleportation trap.

She bit her lip. It was a costly mistake; she’d let her guard down thinking the holy sword was nearby.

“...Well, I have no idea what this place is.”

Having been a student of Jenifa since her junior division years, Alicia knew the Origin Spire like the back of her hand. The place she was in right now, however, was completely new to her, which meant she must still be on the route leading to the holy sword.

This part of the labyrinth was thick with a primeval aura. There were no passageways, let alone rooms or mazes. It was simply one large cavern that seemed to stretch endlessly in one direction.

She produced a flame in her hand to light her way and began to walk, when—

“What the—”

She sensed another presence; a presence that was neither man nor beast.

There was a monster up ahead.

Cautiously, she inched forward, her back pressed against the wall, until she was close enough to see it.

Up ahead was a twisted abomination, its massive form looming ominously over her. It had sharp fangs and claws, wings sprouted from its body, and a tail extended from the back of its beast-like form.

But, in terrifying contrast to its monstrous appearance, the poise with which it stood gave the creature an air of intelligence. It didn’t growl with hunger, nor did it appear to be asleep. It simply stood there like a colossal statue—silent and unmoving, yet ever intimidating.

Alicia carefully observed it with bated breath. This monster was bad news; it was clearly far more dangerous than anything she had encountered before.

The air around it shimmered and blurred, owing to the heat emanating from the cloak of scarlet flames that rose from its body.

“A monster the deep red of blood... It’s the thing Sain warned me about...”

His words surfaced in her mind, telling her to run if she ever saw the monster. She’d wondered why he said that at the time, but, now, the answer was clear to her. This monster was nothing like the others,

and it definitely wasn't one she should dare fight.

Plumes of crimson flames continued to erupt from its body, crackling and hissing in a dire warning to all who would approach. There was no way she could defeat something like this. But—

“Run, huh...? Thing is, there's only one path, and it leads straight through that thing...”

The route she'd taken to get here hadn't ever branched, so, if she wanted to leave, she would have to make her way past the monster.

She considered waiting for the help of her friends. With Melia's skills, they might be able to handle it. But Melia was still unfamiliar with this labyrinth, and it would probably take her some time to find her. There was no guarantee that Alicia could stay safe until then. If there was even a chance that help wouldn't arrive in time, she should act while she still had the strength to. She'd have to ignore Sain's warning and fight while she still could.

Her voice echoed in her head. *Why? Why now, of all times? The holy sword was right there. I almost had it. But now I'm stuck here. My life is in danger. Why couldn't everything just wait? Wait until I found the holy sword... If I had just got my hands on it, even a monster like this would be a pushover...*

“I've come too far... to lose everything now!”

She grit her teeth, steeled her nerves, and leapt toward the monster.

“Orb of fire, purge with raging flames—Flare!”

In head to head combat, she would have no chance. And so Alicia took the initiative, unleashing her spell in a surprise attack; it was a gamble, but one she deemed necessary if she wanted to win.

Hot air converged into a ball of fire before shooting toward the monster like a flaming bullet. She had put as much power as she could into the spell, but held no illusions about defeating her foe. All she needed was an opening.

But the monster didn't give her one. As the fireball closed in, it suddenly sputtered and died out. Not a single ember managed to make contact.

“But... That's...”

Silence fell. The monster remained perfectly still, as though nothing had even happened. Without so much as batting an eye, it had crushed Alicia's opening gambit. She stared at it, speechless, her mind blank.

Then, in one slow movement, the monster opened its mouth, emitting what could only be described as noise. It was both a piercing screech and a rumbling growl.

The dissonant duet of bass and treble flooded the passage and, within moments, black and white circles—voids in the very fabric of

space itself—appeared in the air. From them climbed a smorgasbord of monsters. Goblins, hound dogs, and evil eyes, along with many more she couldn't even begin to name.

“What is this, even...?”

The non-stop medley of unfamiliar monsters, sights, and phenomena assaulted her senses, overwhelming her with fear and confusion. She held up her hand and, as if trying to blow away the swirl of terror, shouted, “*Flare!*”

A ball of raging fire slammed into the monsters. Against multiple foes, it was usually more effective to use “*Velle Flarum*” to summon a wave of fire, but she had no one to hold off the monsters and buy her time. She had no choice but to prioritize casting speed over firepower.

“*Flare! Flagus! ...Flagus! Flagus! Flagus!*”

She threw out spell after spell, but the monsters were now appearing faster than she could destroy them.

Alicia was immediately seized by an intense anxiety. Every new pair of eyes chipped away at her sanity. Each spell she fired took with it a piece of her willpower.

She stopped thinking about getting back alive. Then, she gave up on keeping track of the monsters. Not long after, she stopped taking cover. And, eventually, even the stream of fireballs waned in intensity.

Then, something in her snapped, and she stopped casting spells entirely.

“Damn you! Damn you! *Damn you!*”

All the while, the blood-red monster never moved. It simply looked at her. Looked *down* at her. She felt a surge of anger. At the monster... At her luck... But, most of all, at herself, for she would meet her end at the feet of this accursed beast and its derisive gaze.

“Ah—”

Before she knew it, a horde of monsters had amassed before her. The sheer number was ludicrous, taking up so much room that they were piling on top of one another. She felt the countless pairs of eyes fixed on her. They showed no fear. These monsters could read the tide of battle, and they knew which way it flowed.

Alicia froze, her eyes fixed on the looming horror. They edged closer and closer toward her like a slow avalanche of death. She couldn't look away. Couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

Then, she heard the sound of water.

A ripple passed through her, sending another bouncing back in the opposite direction in the process. The second ripple glided past the monsters and disappeared into the labyrinth walls.

Mere seconds later, there was a resonant *shiiiiick*, followed by the gratifying sound of severed flesh. A corner of the growing mountain of monsters exploded in a cloud of blood that rained back down on the

others, covering them in their own gore. With a gap in its foundation, the towering heap lost its balance, collapsing under its own weight, and the metaphorical avalanche melted before her eyes into a mound of crushed carcasses.

Beyond the bloodbath stood the form of a girl she knew well.

“Are you okay?”

The girl spoke in her usual drawl, but, to Alicia, her voice sounded like the very manifestation of valor.

“Yeah... Somehow.”

“I sincerely apologize. I was a little late,” said the black-haired attendant with a characteristic bow.

Her clothes were spotless and her expression relaxed. Everything about her looked normal... aside from one big exception. The Melia that Alicia knew had immaculate brown eyes. For some reason, the eyes of this girl were a brilliant shade of gold.

“Well. So there *was* one, after all...” she mumbled, her gaze fixed on the blood-red monster Alicia had encountered.

It never so much as raised a finger against Alicia, but as soon as Melia appeared, its fur bristled and its expression grew wary. Melia responded in kind, tightening her grip on her dagger and looking cautiously around at her surroundings.

A form appeared atop the collapsed pile of monsters; one of them had clawed its way out.

Immediately, it pounced at the maid...

“*Flagus!*”

...But was stopped it in its tracks by a ferocious bolt of fire.

Alicia took her place at Melia’s side.

“I’m glad you came, but do you have a plan to get us out of here?”

“Of course. We beat on them until they let us go.”

“...That’s not what most people would call a ‘plan.’”

“True, but it doesn’t look like we have any other choice. How about we take care of the small fry first?”

“...Sure. But be careful. That weird monster over there has the ability to summon more monsters.”

“Don’t worry. It can only cough up so many; we’ll just wait until it runs out.”

There was a certainty to Melia’s tone that seemed odd to Alicia. Then, she remembered that Sain had known about the blood-red monster. It wasn’t much of a leap to assume his attendant knew as well.

“What is that thing?”

“Ah, well... That’s a little too complicated to explain right now.”

“...All right.”

On the surface, Melia’s face was expressionless as always, but it

was possible she was just masking her apprehension. Alicia decided not to pry any further.

"This time, I'm joining in the attack, too. I'll take on the scary-looking one," Melia declared.

"Got it. Then I'll focus on thinning out their numbers."

"Let's go."

Melia closed her eyes and concentrated on her magic.

"Sprites of crystalline veil, roam the endless mist—Londo Mysteria!"

The energies of fire and water mixed to produce steam, and a thick mist enshrouded the monsters. Immediately after, Alicia and Melia dashed apart.

"Orb of fire, purge with raging flames—Flare!"

She took aim at the densest clump of monster forms, and a chorus of pained screeches echoed through the passageway. Melia dashed through the flames with dagger in hand, her uniform fluttering as she danced and twirled through the mist, leaving a trail of corpses in her wake. The sight was striking in both its beauty and terror, as if touched by Death itself.

"Lost souls gathered, scream in fear, die a shapeless death—Death Ripper!"

Melia's incantation continued. Mist magic born from a combination of fire and water was rare to begin with, and Alicia had only ever heard of "Londo Mysteria." The spell Melia was currently casting was completely unknown to her. Its effects, however, were immediately apparent.

A flash of cold metal arced through the mist. It passed through monsters effortlessly, cleaving them apart before they could even react. The blade then vanished into the mist, which then itself melted into the air, leaving not even a shadow behind.

Alicia watched the slaughter with a growing sense of puzzlement. What she was witnessing was leagues beyond the capabilities of a student. Why would someone like Melia enroll in the academy? Her status ill fit her talent.

She clutched at her chest.

Melia was so much better. *Too much better.*



“Watch your six,” said Melia as she engaged another monster.

The warning tore Alicia from her thoughts and she felt a sudden chill at her back. She spun around to find the blood-colored monster baring its fangs at her.

It swiped at her with its claws. Alicia raised her palm, then momentarily paused; they were standing too close to one another for her to retaliate without risking damage from her own spell.

“...*Flare!*”

Nevertheless, she roared the word. Her instincts screamed that she couldn’t afford to defend herself any other way.

She braced herself as the explosion consumed her, only to then send her flying backward.

“Ugh!”

While airborne, she managed a glance at the monster. Like before, it hadn’t taken a speck of damage. Then, her back made abrupt contact with the wall, knocking the air out of her lungs.

Forcing out a pained groan, Alicia pushed herself to her knees to find Melia by her side.

“Are you okay?”

“Could have given me a hand—ow, god, that hurts—if you saw the thing...”

“Well, as you’ve probably realized, that monster nullifies the vast majority of magic thrown at it, which makes it exceptionally difficult to keep it from moving...” she lamented.

For Alicia, the admission had a quelling effect on her growing sense of envious resentment. It felt as though she had just found the first smear on the image of perfection that was Melia. There were, she thought, some things that even the attendant could not do.

“Melia, how’s your side?” she asked, eyes still fixed on the blood-red monster.

“I’ve cleaned up the mob. All that’s left is this thing.”

Despite saying she’d focus on the colossal beast, Melia had still probably killed many times more monsters than Alicia had. Only now did she realize that Sain had been the placating lubricant in their group. With him gone, the skill gap between her and Melia was painfully obvious.

She swallowed a mouthful of spit and, along with it, the mass of bitter emotions swirling within her. This was neither the time nor place.

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Defeat it, of course.”

“...And how, exactly?”

Melia responded by sheathing her dagger.

“Technically, there is a way for me to kill that thing, but I’ll need a pretty big opening. So, I’d like you, Miss Alicia, to distract it for me.”

“Wait, didn’t you just say it nullifies magic? How am I supposed to distract it, then?”

“It can nullify magic, but that doesn’t mean it’s completely immune. You might not be able to damage it, but you *can* trip it up. I’ll take a few swipes while I’m charging up as well. Let’s figure out a good rhythm so we can chip away at it together.”

“...Okay, but what are you going to do to actually kill it?”

“Good question. Let’s just say... something like light magic.”

Alicia nodded, then did a double take.

“I don’t have time to go into the details, but that monster can only be hurt by light or dark magic. And I happen to be able to use the kind of light magic that can take it down.”

“Aren’t you fivekind?”

“Like I said, no time for details.”

“No time.” Alicia’s tone grew a little testy. “Okay then.”

Their exchange was cut short as the blood-red monster let loose another roar.

“Well, whenever you’re ready.”

“...Fine.” Alicia stepped forward. “I don’t even care anymore. You want a distraction? Sure! You can have your damn distraction! Hey! You big, ugly beast!” she yelled in a fit of anger and desperation.

She hurled a ball of fire toward the monster. Then, she hurled a few more, never bothering to check whether they even hit their mark. Visual confirmation was unnecessary, after all; she knew she wasn’t strong enough to hurt it.

After her explosive volley of “Flares,” she grit her teeth and dashed closer to the monster. Her survival instinct went into a frenzy, sending waves of panic through her body. But she fought the urge to flee and continued her approach until she was just close enough. Mid-range battles were her forte. Her spells, as expected, sputtered and died out before reaching the monster, but, as she steadily pushed forward, her barrages landed closer and closer.

“Great torrent of fire, turn all into ashen seas—Velle Flaram!”

“Velle Flaram” was a heavyweight spell that drained a great amount of stamina. Immediately, exhaustion set in and the world around Alicia began to spin. The monster, however, appeared completely unfazed.

“Swirling vicissitudes of mist...” Melia’s incantation began. The thick haze in the air began to gather into a spiraling vortex to her side. *“Converge into a phantom of destruction, deafen the smoldering battlefield with your roar—Mist Wyrml!”*

As the last syllable passed her lips, the misty vortex exploded with the thunderous boom of a cannon, launching itself at the monster like a dreadful leviathan of wind and water. Its sheer force was jaw-dropping, far eclipsing everything in Alicia's repertoire. It slammed into the monster with a deafening crunch; the resulting shockwave carried through the walls and ground, shaking Alicia to her very core.

Even then, the monster stood its ground.

"Now that's a tough nut to crack," Melia muttered with a *tsk*.

And then the monster took its turn. It growled, a blaze of crimson flaring up all around it. The sight alone sent an intense chill down Alicia's spine and, almost reflexively, she lunged to the side.

A split second later, a ray of flame bore a hole into the ground where she'd stood.

"What are we supposed to do...?"

Blood-red flames rained down on her from all directions. Some were thin, drawn-out rays, others great circular bolts. Each kind of attack traveled in a unique pattern and fell at a different pace, making it excruciatingly difficult to grasp the correct rhythm for evading them. Every so often, she would find an opening and throw out a "Flagus" of her own, but the effect was entirely negligible.

As she struggled to keep her concentration, Melia's voice echoed through her mind.

That monster can only be hurt by light or darkness magic.

She stopped. Time seemed to slow down. She glanced down at her hands, which were now bloodied and raw. Deep crimson lines ran across them like some sort of ghastly display of cross-hatching. But, if they could unleash light magic... The momentum would instantly swing in her favor. She would be able to defeat that monster. *Without Melia's help.*

The setup was perfect. The hero's tale had reached its epic climax. Her back was against the wall, and now was the time for a grand miracle. It was do or die; now or never. The dramatic twist; the big reversal.

She felt it—*knew it*. This was it. The time was right. The stage was set. The moment was hers. She only needed to claim it.

Then, for some reason, she remembered Sain's words.

Master your fire magic first. Once you do, your talents will truly come to fruition.

They were so vague. So meaningless. And yet, they somehow set her heart aflutter.

"Orb of fire, purge with raging flames—Flare!"

After dodging an oncoming ray, she concentrated what little strength she had left into one final attack. A ball of fire appeared in her palm, the surrounding air wavering as it grew to an enormous

size. In one swift move, she shot it toward the monster.

The miniature sun hissed and crackled as it shattered through what looked like pane after pane of invisible glass, losing speed as it went. However, it did not stop. It kept going, and going...

And then, it hit.

Alicia opened her eyes wide. Her heart raced. All of a sudden, everything became clear. She knew how this fight would end. For the first time, the monster howled in pain. Her magic had reached it. *Hurt it.*

“Yes! Take that, you freak!”

She reveled in her triumph, made all the sweeter by the look of complete disbelief on Melia’s face. The moment was glorious.

“Thank you very much.”

As Alicia continued her small victory dance, Melia reappeared in the mist. The hazy shadow of her figure overlapped with the monster’s. They were back to back. She was close—so dangerously close. Then, she raised her arm high up in the air.

“Siem Saevas, here I bear the attendant’s mark. Second Gift—Holy Sinking Blade!”

There was a blinding flash. Melia’s arm glowed with a golden radiance, illuminating her so clearly that not even the thick mist could shroud her. Pure light gathered along her arm, taking on the shape of a sword.

The sight of the shining blade burned itself into Alicia’s eyes; she couldn’t look away. Then, everything happened in an instant.

Melia spun, her eyes and blade drawing golden trails through the air in poignant juxtaposition with her fluttering black hair. A bright arc shimmered through the blood-red monster, and it was no more.

The terrible creature, nigh-untouchable in its overwhelming power, had been reduced to another carcass on the ground.

“Ah ha... Ah ha ha... What is this... I can’t even...”

Alicia slumped down onto her knees, watching as the other girl pat down her uniform, threw back her silky black hair, and let out a quick, casual breath. There wasn’t the slightest sign of fatigue in the attendant’s expression.

Something dark and viscous began to blister in Alicia’s heart. She had tried so hard, fought with all her strength, but, in the end, it didn’t even matter. She hadn’t even come close. Even in terms of pure firepower, she was no match for Melia. All she did was create a tiny, *tiny* opening. Melia did the rest. Melia did everything. Melia did everything *better*.

“...Well, color me surprised. I knew you were strong, but I didn’t expect you to be *that* strong.”

“No, color *me* surprised... Never did I imagine you’d be able to

land a hit on that thing.”

Alicia felt her eye twitch. Was that a gibe? She laughed it off.

“Hey, how come you’re Sain’s attendant? If you’re that strong, there must be tons of other jobs you can do.”

It was an honest question. She didn’t mean it as a slight against Sain, it just seemed like an objective truth that the two were ridiculously mismatched.

“Ah... that’s because...” Melia trailed off hesitantly, as if the answer was something difficult for her to say.

Alicia cocked an eyebrow curiously. Then, a thought came to her, and her expression darkened.

“Wait... Don’t tell me... Did he—”

“Can you keep a secret?”

Alicia nodded.

“You see, the truth is...”

+ + +

The two girls chatted for some time. Only when their conversation drew to a close did they hear the frantic patter of hurried footsteps.

“S-Sorry! I’m late, but I’m here now!” he shouted anxiously.

Alicia turned to regard the approaching figure, taking in his black hair, blue eyes, and peculiar outfit. It was definitely Sain.

Her eyes narrowed.

“Are you two okay—”

“You sick bastard!”

Sain froze, baffled by what he had just heard.

“How can you blackmail such a sweet young girl into following you around?! You’re the worst!”

“What?! What the flying flecks are you talking about?!”

Alicia pulled Melia into her arms like a mother protecting her child as a bewildered Sain stared at them, speechless at the unexpected turn of events.



+ + +

Sain ran as fast as he could. He knew he was weak. He knew he'd be deadweight. But, nevertheless, he ran alone through the dangerous labyrinth, because he knew his friends were in trouble.

Though he'd sent Melia off in advance, he couldn't help but worry. What if they needed him? What if there was something he could do? Even if there wasn't, he had to be there, because that was what it meant to be a friend. True friends stayed at each other's side no matter the circumstance.

And so, he ran. On and on, he ran. At times, he held his breath and crawled past monsters, desperately hoping they wouldn't notice him. At other times, he stumbled and struggled through traps, barely making it through them alive. And when he finally arrived—

+ + +

"Do you swear?! Do you swear on your life and honor and everything you've ever known and loved... that what she said isn't true?!" Alicia demanded, leaning forward with wide, hysterical eyes.

"Yes! I told you so many times already!" Sain rebutted, sitting in formal repentance with his legs folded under him.

"...I don't buy it."

"What do I have to do to get you to believe me...?"

"Convince me, then. Show some effort." Her voice was cold and contemptuous, and she glared down at Sain with the utmost disgust.

Sain, for his part, still hadn't fully understood why any of this was happening, but he had a pretty good hunch. He snuck a glance at the wily trickster he called his attendant. Her eyes had returned to their normal brown color, and her expression was as flat as always.

When she noticed him looking at her, though, she shot him a quick, sly grin and stuck out her tongue before reverting to her usual mask of indifference.

"Hey, eyes on me, buddy!" Alicia snapped, causing him to jump and quickly look back in her direction. She leaned in further, menacing shadows falling across her glowering face. "Hmph! I see you looking at her. Nice try, but Melia's not going to listen to you anymore, because she's going to stand up for herself. She's done with you! Got it, you evil slavedriver of a master?"

"Who are you calling an evil slavedriver, damn it?!"

"I'll give you one last chance, then. Can you look me in the eye and *honestly* swear to the gods that you aren't holding Melia against her will and forcing her to work for you?"

“W-Wait, about that, uh... Can we just, like, not do the god part? I’ll swear to you however many times you want, but—”

“See? Guilty as charged!”

“Noooo! Why?!”

“Why? Why can’t you swear to the gods, then? Is it because, oh, I don’t know, you’re a terrible person who blackmails young, defenseless girls?”

“Auuuugh, no, that’s not true! It’s not, but... Hnnnngh! O-Okay, fine! I’ll do it. I’ll swear to the... the... gods...”

“Come on! I can’t hear you!”

“Ughh... Hnnnngh...”

Sain held his head in his hands, as if undergoing some sort of terrible internal struggle, and let out an anguished wail. Then, in a tone of tragic resolve, he declared, “Fine! I swear to the gods!”

Immediately after, he screamed with even deeper distress.

“Gaaaaaaaah! Shut up! Shut up, goddess! How many times do I have to tell you not to throw a fit in my head?! Get out—*Gyeeeeeeeeeh?!?*”

His shrieks grew higher and higher in pitch.

“Damn it! Cut that out! Stop dancing in joy— What?! We love each other with all our hearts? In your dreams, lady! I swore to the *other* gods! I didn’t say anything about you—

“Augh, damn it! There you go with the crying again! Ugh, I hate it when you do this! Can you please just act your age? You’re always going *way* overboard with your obsessive worrying, but as soon as I scold you, even a little, you start bawling your eyes out—

“Uh oh, can you stop crying now? It’s my fault, okay? I’m sorry, so would you please stop crying already?! If you keep crying like this, the angels are going to rip me a new— *Gyaaaaaaaah!*”

Sain fell to the ground and began writhing in agony. Alicia raised a suspicious eyebrow, but, aside from that, seemed content to leave Sain to his misery.

Eventually, Melia decided to offer him some words of comfort.

“You know, I have a pretty good idea what just happened there, and... Well, I offer my condolences.”

“How about—ugh, my head—an apology, damn it? Whose fault do you think this is?”

In response to his bitter complaint, Melia curled the very corner of her lips to allow just a sliver of her tongue to poke between them. It was, in a way, probably one of Melia’s most impressive feats: Her ability to keep a completely straight face while mocking him at the same time. Only after that did she turn to Alicia.

“Miss Alicia. My sincerest apologies, but what I told you was indeed just a joke.”

“Nobody’s forcing you? Really? Do you mean it?”

“I sure do.”

“...In that case, I guess it’s fine.”

Seeing that he’d finally been absolved of the accusation against him, Sain breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Then, to ensure he never ended up in a situation like this ever again, he turned to Alicia.

“Honestly, it’s simply ludicrous that you even suspected me in the first place. Miss Gold, let me clear this up once and for all. Come. Take a good look at the two of us.”

Alicia looked from him to Melia, and then back again. Her brow furrowed into a perplexed frown.

“Think about it. If one of us has something on the other, who do you think it would be? Between the two of us, do I *really* look like the one with the leverage?”

“...Good point.”

Sain winced. The speed with which she agreed was surprisingly hurtful. Then, he felt a tug on his coat.

“Master Sain, you have something on me, too, you know? More specifically, you stole something of mine...”

“What? I did? When? Huh...? I don’t remember ever taking anything... What was it?”

Melia held his gaze for a few seconds before letting out a deep sigh.

“Haa... What was it indeed...”

Alicia watched them, shrugged, and said, “Anyway, let’s get out of here first.”

They nodded in agreement, and the three headed toward the exit. Both Sain and Melia had come here without the magic circles, so they had no trouble finding their way back.

After walking for a while, Melia slowed her pace, allowing Alicia to pull ahead, and whispered to Sain.

“Just so you know... I still don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Sain scratched his head.

“What isn’t?”

“Well... How you’re keeping your power hidden...”

“Hidden? I’m not hiding anything. This is the true me. Everything up until now has just been me taking the goddess’s power for granted.”

“The true Master Sain would have no business being mocked like that...”

“...Are you still hung up on that?”

“Not everyone in this world is okay with hearing bad things said about you, you know? Some people get upset.”

It seemed she was still dwelling on the events of the fiftieth floor,

where they'd received a rather rude welcome from some students they didn't even know. Sain, in particular, had been called a loser, and Melia was having a very hard time letting that go.

"Up until now, I've only ever fought using borrowed strength. Their comments reflect the path I took and the choices I made. Grating though it may be, such criticism is well deserved, for neglecting my own training was my failure and mine alone."

He spoke from his heart, but, still, Melia appeared unconvinced.

"The only thing that's well deserved here is a good stabbing," she muttered, crossing her arms with a slight pout.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that. I get that you're stressed out about it, but there's no cause for violence. It's not like they were being actively hostile—"

"And the one who deserves it is Master Sain."

"Wait, me?! I'm the one who's getting stabbed?!"

"You sure are. Death to all dense masters."

"Hnngh, I don't understand. What did I do wrong...?"

Their debate was utterly fruitless, as everything Melia said went straight over Sain's head. In the end, with her exasperated and him thoroughly bewildered, they dropped the topic. They were, after all, still in the labyrinth; there was no shortage of hazards that vied for their attention.

After another period of walking, Sain broke the silence.

"Oh, I should have said this earlier."

"Said what?"

Sain regarded the girl who had braved the dangers of the labyrinth in his place to rescue Alicia. There were important words that remained unspoken.

"I'm glad you're safe." He looked her in the eyes. "Thank you, *Melia*."

"Ah!" There was something oddly sensual about her reaction. It sounded almost like a moan. "Oh, Master Sain, you..."

Realizing she'd stopped walking, Sain did the same and turned around.

"What's wrong, Melia?"

"Ahh!"

She flinched at the word, and her fists trembled ever so slightly. A rosy tint painted her cheeks.

Sain scratched his head as he looked at her, his face the usual mask of confusion.

"Um, you know... If you could stop calling me by name, I'd really appreciate that..."

Her words finally hit Sain like a hammer to the gut. He wasn't making advances; his intentions were entirely platonic. He was sure

Melia knew that too, but it still made her visibly uncomfortable to hear him say her name.

Regret welled up in his throat, his vision becoming ever so slightly blurred. He quickly dabbed the tears away and, his voice trembling, apologized profusely.

“I-I’m sorry. Of course you hate it when I do that. I’ll be careful from now on. Trust me. Won’t happen again.”

“Oh, um, actually... It’s not that I hate it, but, you know... There’s a time and place for these things, and I’d prefer that you saved it for when it’s just the two of us...”

Melia’s mumblings did not, however, reach the ears of a very dejected Sain.

Chapter 4: Chaos

“Hey, are you sure this is the right direction?” asked Alicia.

After defeating the blood-red monster, the three had resumed their search for the holy sword.

“Well, this is the only path that goes further into the labyrinth,” answered Sain as he carefully traversed a mountain of rubble up ahead.

The path they followed turned out to be rather complicated, and Sain would scout ahead for monsters before signaling the girls to follow.

“Hm?”

He paused.

“What’s wrong, Sain? Monsters up ahead?” Alicia queried.

Sain didn’t turn around. Instead, his eyes stayed fixed on something in the distance as he responded.

“No, no monsters, but... Is that the holy sword?”

“Seriously?! Where?! Where is it?!”

“I-I’m not sure. I just felt like it might be up ahead.”

“Good enough! Come on! Let’s go!”

Alicia vaulted over the rubble, her prior fatigue suddenly nowhere to be found, and rushed past him.

He frowned. It seemed a tad careless to charge forward like that. Fortunately, there were no monsters nearby, so he was content to let her go. It also gave him the opportunity to speak with Melia alone.

“Master Sain, did you sense something?”

“Yes. Just barely, but it did resemble the goddess’s blessing. Honestly, I feel like there are too many impurities for it to be a holy sword... But that’s not the problem. The problem is that I also sensed their presence.”

Melia’s eyes narrowed.

“And by ‘their presence’ you mean... Chaos?”

“Indeed. They’re close... Prepare yourself. We should be ready to fight at a moment’s notice.”

He’d thought that, after the previous fight, they were through the worst of it. It appeared, however, that he was mistaken. He focused his senses and, almost immediately, he felt it. Something was off. It was the same sensation as when he’d used the labyrinth gate in the academy. The source of the corruption was still alive and well.

“What should we do about Miss Alicia?”

“...She’s just a student. We can’t drag her into this. This is our fight,” he said firmly. “As luck would have it, though, their normally-infuriating cowardice works to our advantage right now. Chances are, they won’t make the first move... We might, however, get caught in one of their traps, like we did before. So be on your guard. If things really go south, take her and run.”

“Understood. I’ll leave the violent stuff to you.”

Their makeshift strategy meeting concluded, Sain looked up to find Alicia was a good distance ahead.

“Miss Gold!”

“What?”

“I get that you’re excited, but we’re not in the clear yet! Keep your guard up!”

“I know! You two had better be watching my back properly too!”

Sain frowned. While Alicia did seem to be paying attention to her surroundings, something didn’t feel right. There was an excessive hastiness to her manner that Melia seemed to have also noticed.

“...You think she’s still mulling over what the president said to her?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. That president’s got a knack for causing verbal trauma.”

“It’s easy to have tunnel vision when you’re hung up on something. I hope she doesn’t do anything careless,” said Sain, his voice thick with concern.

Melia regarded him with a pensive look. Then, she spoke as if she had just remembered something.

“On that note... Master Sain, you know how I went to rescue Miss Alicia, and we had a quick scuffle with that monster I told you about? As a matter of fact, Miss Alicia managed to hurt the monster with her magic.”

“Hm? She did?”

“She sure did. Wasn’t that monster supposed to be completely immune to fire magic?”

“It should be... Hm. Then that must mean Miss Gold’s powers are very close to awakening...” Sain mumbled, nodding to himself.

Just then, they heard an excited yelp from Alicia.

“Found it!”

Seeing that Alicia had dashed off ahead, Sain and Melia put their conversation on hold to run after her. It didn’t take long for Sain to see for himself what Alicia had discovered.

“Is that...”

In the middle of an enormous open space sat a hexagonal pedestal, dull and lifeless in appearance. A beautiful sword, its naked

blade partly exposed, was embedded in its center, glowing with the gentle white lustre of fresh, moonlit snow.

Its quiet splendor was breathtaking, and Sain swallowed in spite of himself.

“The holy sword? It’s— Wait, no!”

He felt a sudden, wild flutter in the pit of his stomach. His hands immediately shot to his collar from which he tore his silver necklace.

A portion of his power was released, and his once blue eyes blazed with a golden hue.

“Sain! We did it! It’s the holy sword!”

Alicia reached for its hilt, her expression one of pure elation.

Sain, however, could see past the sword’s guise for what it truly was. He watched in horror as Alicia’s fingers neared the revolting object, a pulsating mess of blood-red matter from hilt to blade. At times, gory discharges accompanied its sickening undulations. The sight was nauseating, but Alicia’s eyes glowed with delight as she was drawn closer and closer.

“Get away from that thing! It’s no holy sword! Not anymore!”

“Wha—”

Alicia paused when she heard Sain yell, but it was too late. The abomination launched from its pedestal and toward Alicia, as though it were being sucked toward her hand. The instant its hilt touched her palm, the sword exploded in a swirling storm of crimson energy.

“Miss Gold! Stay strong! Don’t let it consume you!”

Alicia managed only a weak groan before all signs of resistance faded. A band of blood-red light shot out of the sword, wrapping itself around her in the shape of a sphere until she was enveloped completely.

“What’s happening...?”

“The holy sword was tainted by... *them*. It’s become nothing more than a source of contamination,” said Sain, his voice heavy with regret. “We weren’t the only ones to notice Miss Gold’s potential. And, on top of that, her resolve is faltering right now. They hit us when we weren’t ready. ...We slipped up.”

A scream of agony filled the air as the fake sword’s energy ate away at her, beginning to alter her very existence. At this stage, recklessly interfering with the process was exceedingly dangerous—halting the transformation halfway would risk leaving Alicia disfigured for life.

“What now? Are you going to use your power?”

Sain contemplated his options for a minute.

“...No. There’s no need. They intend to infest her weakened mind, and my power can do little to heal an ailing psyche. What we need right now isn’t power, but words. We’re not going to beat her down.

We're going to *talk* her down."

The energy finally stopped gathering around her.

For an instant, it hung in the air, swirling ominously as a sphere of corrupted power. And then, in an instant, it collapsed, and the terrible energy rushed inward all at once. A bright flash, followed by a shockwave that caused Sain to wince and shield his face.

When he lowered his arm, Alicia had reappeared. Deathly silent, she swayed in place ever so slightly. Her eyes were dull and lifeless, and there was an eerie tilt to her head. An immensely powerful aura radiated from her, its quality wild, cruel, and entirely alien.

Alicia's essence was gone, replaced by something far darker. She was now more monster than woman in both spirit and appearance.

The blood-red sword, as though it saw no further need for deception, had dropped its guise, allowing its true form to be seen in all its pulsating hideousness.

The fingers of Alicia's right hand were firmly wrapped around its hilt. Her hair had fallen over her face, and, when its golden strands fluttered, Sain and Melia caught a glimpse of a pair of muddied, crimson eyes.

In that instant, they knew what they had to do.

"Let's go, Melia. We're reversing Miss Gold's brainwashing."

"Okay."



A strange sensation overcame Alicia, feeling as though she had been completely immersed in something indescribable. It felt neither warm nor cold, and touched every part of her body.

She knew two things about it, though: It was something dreadful, and it was profoundly powerful—far more powerful than she could ever become on her own.

Loser.

A voice echoed in her mind.

Disgrace.

Clan of Light, my ass!

Before she knew it, she was back at school, and she looked down to find herself in her junior division uniform. It occurred to her that this must be a scene from her memory.

Man, I can't believe she's still in school.

Her junior division days passed in a blur, and she soon found her life in the intermediate division playing out in front of her. The opening ceremony had only just ended, and her peers were already pelting her with slurs and insults.

"...Shut up."

She pressed her hands to her ears, but the voices wouldn't stop. All the while, a shadow crept over her. When she looked up, the student council president, Cain, was standing over her.

No one asked you to be here, and your efforts aren't doing anyone any favors.

She might as well be announcing the decline of her clan.

"...Stop."

She bit into her lip. Cain's words cut deep in their truth, but her own silence hurt even more. She wondered what Cain thought of her. He probably saw her as a confident, bullish person, yet he couldn't be further from the truth. Her bold exterior was an act—a show she put on for herself to keep her resolve from faltering.

Two figures materialized where Cain had once stood. She looked at their faces, and her voice fell to a whisper.

"Mom... Dad..."

They stood, motionless, casting long and imposing shadows over her crouched form.

Giving birth to you was a mistake.

Her eyes went wide at her father's words.

Our clan is dying, and it's your fault.

Everything we've built up is falling apart, and it's all because of you.

She loved her parents, loved their kindness and smiles. Now, they

stared down at her with eyes she didn't recognize. They were cold and filled with hatred, and the faint reflection she saw in them made clear the target of their malice.

"No, no, no... Mom and dad would never say that...!"

These couldn't be her parents. They must be fakes. And yet, what proof did she have? How would she know what they truly thought? For a moment, doubt gripped her heart.

Then, her icy-eyed parents faded, replaced by two new figures.

"S-Sain... and Melia..."

They watched her wordlessly. They hadn't even known each other for a month. In fact, they had only met a few days ago. She knew almost nothing about them, and yet, they'd spent so much time together. Why?

She knew the reason. It was because she had no one else to turn to. No one else who accepted her.

"H-Hey. You two are on my side, right? You're cheering me on? W-We're... two of a kind... aren't we?"

There was a desperation to her voice, as if she were clinging onto one last shred of hope. Sain looked at her, his expression tender and kind.

You've tried hard enough. Just let it go.

His words flowed across her heart like a gentle stream, softening its calloused exterior.

"B-But... I can't... I haven't..."

It's okay. I know how much it hurts.

Something gave way. She felt a warmth in her chest. Her mouth opened, but no words passed her lips. No words were needed; he'd voiced them for her. Those might be the very words that she'd always wanted to hear.

Sain approached her with a compassionate smile. He'd exposed the feelings she'd kept hidden for so long. To her surprise, a deep happiness welled up inside her.

Don't worry. The thing you've been seeking all this time... is right there.

He pointed at her chest, where an indiscernible object the deep red of blood throbbed. Just moments before, it had seemed like something dreadful. Now, it exuded a sense of warmth. She felt its all-consuming power and knew she was safe; it would protect her frail, vulnerable self.

No more losing. No more hurting. She'd gain everyone's approval. They'd recognize her achievement. And she had the power to do it... right here in her hands.

"This... is it?"

Yes.

“I can... make the hurting stop?”

Yes.

Sain and Melia answered her with tender gazes. They knew. They understood.

For so long, she'd been fighting. She tried so hard. No one asked her to. No one expected her to. But, she had something to prove. For the one person who believed in her—herself.

And so, she steeled her nerves, hardened her heart, and kept on fighting. But the world was cruel, and its winds were harsh. Over time, she felt herself wearing away, eroded by day after day of fruitless efforts until nothing remained. Nothing but the pain. Her abraded heart, dry and calloused, sought not the grim cliffs of progress but the soft streams of eternal reprieve.

No more trying. No more pain.

“Ah... Finally... I can let go.”

And so, in the hope of putting her weary mind to rest, she welcomed the power.

Melia made the first move. To protect her master, and to save her friend, she sent magical energy coursing through the holy mark on her right thigh.

“Siem Saevas, here I bear the attendant’s mark. Second Gift—Holy Sinking Blade!”

A blade of pure light flashed into existence before Melia. She grabbed it by the hilt and immediately leapt up high, her form tracing a smooth parabola through the air. As she reached the peak of her jump, her hands passed momentarily over her skirt; in the blink of an eye, several hidden daggers shot toward Alicia.

None, however, made it past the blood-red energies that swirled around her.

Undaunted, Melia continued to throw dagger after dagger; a fifth, sixth, and then a seventh closed in on Alicia.

Then, just as she was about to land, Melia spun into a somersault. The momentum carried her blade into a tremendous swing...

“Take this.”

...which then erupted into a blinding flash as the sword made contact.

Alicia had blocked the strike with her corrupted sword.

“Miss Gold! Can you hear me?”

As the two girls crossed swords, Sain’s voice rang out from across the room.

“If you can hear me, then pull yourself together! That power is corrupting your mind, but you can fight it! You can push back against its advances!”

There was no response. Instead, Alicia continued to swing her

sword at Melia, who fended off each attack with her own holy blade.

Springing into a quick flip, Melia parried an oncoming swipe and quickly moved in to counterattack. She had to fight carefully; her blade was sharp but thin, making it vulnerable to direct strikes, while the thickness of Alicia's sword made it not only durable, but also ideal for landing a cleaving blow.

Melia continued to weave around oncoming slashes as she alternated between aggression and avoidance. Alicia, on the other hand, kept up a strong defense, taking every opportunity to pull her opponent into a clash of swords.

Melia was already at a disadvantage; allowing their battle to continue much longer would only put her in an even more unfavorable position.

Sain raised his own sword, brandishing its fearsome ebony luster as he swung at Alicia. She evaded with a nimble sidestep, watching calmly as the blade cut through nothing but air. She then raised her own sword, immediately targeting Melia with a horizontal sweep.

Melia blocked, but the impact was still enough to send her flying backward.

Alicia turned to the now-vulnerable Sain and lunged forward with her blade. He had barely managed to twist his sword into a parry when a sudden force dug into his stomach, knocking him back. Alicia had lashed out with a kick, having taken advantage of Sain's slight opening from the previous blow.

Just as he was about to hit the ground, a thick blanket of mist appeared and softened his landing.

"Easy now. Don't push yourself too hard."

Sain gestured his thanks as he got up and turned to face Alicia again.

"Her guard is impenetrable. This doesn't feel like Miss Gold's power; it must belong to the one planting these seeds of corruption in her mind."

"Which means... we're likely dealing with what was originally Ganmei Hajun."

"Yes. Ganmei Hajun, The Mighty Shield. Judging from how dense the power is, Miss Gold would probably be its fourth reincarnation."

Suddenly, he felt an excruciating heat burn across his skin. He looked up to find a massive fireball floating above Alicia.

It was her favorite spell, "Flare," except greatly amplified in both size and intensity by the crimson energies surrounding her.

"Londo Mysteria!"

Skipping the incantation diminished the effect of her spell, but she didn't have much time before the fireball would find its mark.

A surge of mist enshrouded Sain, granting him enough cover to

quickly dash behind Alicia. A few seconds later, it thinned, revealing a wide stretch of scorched earth where he had just stood. At the same time, Melia leaped out of the mist.

A glint of metal met a blood-red edge as Alicia blocked her strike again.

But it was a feint. Ignoring the deflected dagger whirling through the air, Melia swung her glowing blade at Alicia. This time, the swirling energies lashed out instead, parrying her second attack.

Sain heard an audible *tsk* as Melia landed beside him. Normal attacks weren't going to work.

He took a moment to consider their options.

"...She's being surprisingly passive," he mused.

"Speak for yourself. I'm the one doing acrobatics around her."

"Still, I expected her to be a lot more aggressive. Look, even now, she's not coming after us."

Granted, Sain was probably too weak to even register as a threat in Alicia's eyes, but that allowed him time to observe. There was a strange sense of propriety to the way she was fighting, almost as if she were treating them as training partners. When Sain or Melia attacked, she would defend and then counterattack. Even during her attack, if they retreated, she wouldn't pursue them.

This wasn't the style of someone trying to defeat an opponent. It was the style of someone trying to keep an opponent away.

Or... the style of someone trying to keep herself away.

"Aha... I see what's going on. You've already regained consciousness, haven't you?" he probed.

Ever so slowly, Alicia moved her lips.

"This... is fine."

From within the swirling vortex of crimson energy, they heard her speak.

"This... is enough... for me. I'm satisfied."

Her voice trembled, but it was sincere.

"This power... At first, it felt strange, but I'm slowly figuring out how to use it... Hey, you two know what this is, right? Then you must realize what this means for me... With this, I can change. Now that I have this power, I don't even need light magic anymore. No one will mock me. No one can rival me. No more restraints. With this... I'm free!"

Alicia's voice grew in volume as she spoke, eventually rising to a shout.

"So just go away! Leave me alone! I'm going to live the way I want!"

Sain listened patiently to every word, allowing her to finish before he answered.

“No.”

The tears glistening in her eyes told him all he needed to know. Her passion betrayed her words. Deep down, she was still struggling.

“Why—”

“I recall saying this once, but for your sake, I’ll say it again. Steel yourself against all other temptations! Anything else that may lead you astray should be ignored, else it will surely lead you to compromise!” He looked her straight in the eyes. “And *this* is compromise!”

When Sain had first learned Alicia belonged to the Clan of Light, he’d offered her some advice as a fellow dream-chaser who had preceded her. He had warned her not to accept anything that came short of her dream. Not to do the very thing she was doing now—giving up and succumbing to compromise. She’d decided that this power she’d gained by chance was the happiness she sought, and she was about to give herself over to it.

Sain’s brows sank into a deep frown.

Over my dead body.

The situation wasn’t just problematic—it was personal. He could feel every ounce of her sorrow and regret as though it were his own. He knew her pain.

“Shut up! Shut up... Who are you to say it’s a compromise? That’s my decision to make.”

“And the choice you’re making is wrong.”

“How would you know?! You don’t know what I want!”

“I sure as hell do! And do you know why? Because we’re two of a kind!”

She paused. Then, her eyes downcast, she forced out three words in a low, anguished tone.

“...No we’re not.”

For a moment, a pained silence hung in the air. Then, Alicia continued.

“I’m not strong like you are. Even when people say such nasty things about you, you still walk around with your head held high. I... I just can’t. I hear their words, and they hurt. I do my best to bite down and move on, but... they hurt. Every day, I fight back the urge to run. To escape from it all.

“After we ran into Cain, do you remember what you said to me? You said I wasn’t acting like my usual self... Hah. Get out of here. As if you know what I’m like. Do you know what I’ve been through? No! So stop acting like you do!”

The crimson flames circling her flared, and licks of fire lashed out toward Sain as she screamed her final words:

“This is my decision, and it’s *not* wrong!”

He reacted just in time to avoid them, then directed Melia a glance brimming with determination. She nodded in response, and then held her delicate hands out toward Alicia.

“*Worta Halden!*”

Watery arms rose out of the ground and grabbed Alicia by the legs, pulling her from her feet.

“What?!”

Not missing a beat, Sain swiped his sword in a horizontal line.

“St-Stop him!”

His black sword slammed into the barrier of embers around Alicia. But it felt as though he were pushing through an extremely viscous fluid, and his momentum was halted.

“You... are... *wrong!*”

Sain forced the words from his throat as he dug into the ground with his legs, pushing forward even harder.

“Stop talking like you know—”

“I *do* know, damn it! Because I’ve been through it! Over and over again! And every *single* time, I came *this* close to making the wrong choice!”

Alicia’s expression flared with unbridled rage as jets of fire erupted from her body, forcing Sain to quickly distance himself. She glared at him with hard, hostile eyes.

“Get him!”

At her command, blood-red flames twisted into the shape of serpents lunged at Sain.

“Ah... Haha... Hahahaha! What’s this? This is amazing! I can control these just by *thinking* about them! Yes, yes, yes! Who knew I’d have this kind of power sleeping within me? Look at me, Sain! Look at what I can do! Are you going to tell me *this* is a mistake?!”

At that moment, a bolt of sheer light crashed down in front of Sain with so much force that he was knocked from his feet. A shockwave exploded from the point of impact, extinguishing the oncoming flames.

Melia landed to his side, impaling her glowing blade firmly into the ground. But before she could even let out a sigh of relief, Sain was on his feet again, dashing toward Alicia.

“Yes, because it is!”

“Y-You... stupid!”

The brevity of Sain’s responses only angered Alicia further; she targeted him with wave after wave of attacks.

Her power was immense, but rage dulled her aim. Sain dodged and weaved through rolling tides of fiery destruction, never stopping or slowing.

“...We’re the same, after all. Otherwise, our trials couldn’t possibly

be so similar. Right now, you've come up against a wall. It's a wall I know all too well. That's why I can tell you... about the fragility of power gained through surrender! Such is my duty as your predecessor in this quest of hardships!"

He raised his empty left hand as he ran, pointing it at Alicia.

"Darku!"

At Sain's command, a tiny bolt of darkness flew toward his target. Amidst a battlefield where raging flames danced a deadly waltz with blinding flashes from a blade of light, his spell was all but comical in its scale. Weak and slow, it could inflict little more than a bruise or a scrape even on a direct hit.

The bolt followed its path until a stray ember swatted it out of existence. Alicia couldn't help but laugh.

"Please! Your dinky little spells aren't going to—"

"Darku!"

After getting as close to her as possible, Sain cast the same spell again, and it produced the same bolt as last time.

Alicia clicked her tongue in irritation and flicked her finger at the incoming attack. A stream of fire followed the motion of her hand, swallowing the pitiful nugget of darkness.

"Ugh. You're getting on my nerves... I'll show you some real magic."

Alicia broke out in a wild laughter as a menacing blaze erupted around her. Sain quickly leapt back a few steps to create some distance.

"Orb of black fire, purge with raging flames—Flare!"

A darkened "Flare" appeared in the air above them. Then, another materialized beside it. And another. Alicia flicked her hand, sending not one, not two, but over ten massive orbs of crimson flame crashing down on Sain.

He could feel their intense heat burning his eyes, and had no choice but to squint as he focused all of his senses on dodging the imminent threat. An orb grazed his coat, searing the skin underneath. He gasped in pain, only for the steaming fumes to scald his throat.

The pause cost him dearly, as another orb was mere seconds away from swallowing him whole.

Just then, Melia's blade ruptured the approaching ball of fiery death. It shattered, firing shards toward the other orbs that caused a chain reaction of explosions. Heat and sound filled the room.

"Surround with waves!"

Through the noise, Alicia continue her incantation. Broken flames rallied into a swirling vortex, trapping Sain and Melia inside. Fire swelled out at them in swift and unpredictable intervals, making it impossible for Melia to guard against it all.

Roaring flames licked Sain's skin.

"Auuuugh!"

His body was immediately overcome with unbearable pain. But he grit his teeth and pushed forward.

As he ran, he tried to lift his arms to check the extent of his wounds, only to find his left hurt too much to move.

"Ahaha! Look! Even continuous incantation is a cinch for me now!" yelled Alicia amidst bursts of feral laughter.

Sain grimaced at the sight. The wicked power was feeding her jealousy of Melia, pushing the worst of her to the surface. Envy gave way to hatred and hatred to doubt before even darker emotions bubbled up, congealing into a terrible, twisted grin.

Unforgivable.

What that vile power was doing to Alicia was absolutely unforgivable.

"That's not your power!"

"Yes it is! It's mine!"

Their furious shouting echoed throughout the room.

A scorching tendril lurched toward Sain. He dodged it and drew a deep breath, ignoring the scorching heat that flooded his lungs. Then, he yelled as loudly as he could, his voice hoarse and his words charged with emotion.

"Listen to me! Just like you, I was once bestowed an immense power!"

Melia, under the cover of her summoned mist, appeared behind Alicia and slashed at her with her shimmering blade. Alicia met the blow with her right arm, the blood-red embers around it acting as armor.

"By using it, I could bring joy to everyone! Friends! Family! Teachers and mentors! Everyone thanked me with tears of gratitude! Everyone told me to use the power! They asked me! *Begged* me!"

Alicia swiped at Melia to push her away, creating an opening that Sain immediately jumped on. He dashed forward.

Two fireballs hurtled in his direction. He dodged the first. The second struck his leg. But he kept running.

"But," he screamed, "I had nothing! The power brought me no closer to what I truly wanted!"

His face contorted with pain, beads of sweat forming on his brow. His lips trembled as he spoke, but he continued.

"I saved so many lives! Granted so many wishes! I was made a hero! People sang my praises! They looked up to me! Adored and admired me! But... In the end, I couldn't do anything... I couldn't help the one person who truly mattered to me."

Melia distracted Alicia with strike after strike, allowing Sain to

continue his approach. Time and time again, his legs failed him and he stumbled. But each time, he picked himself up and kept pushing forward.

“Tell me! What does light magic mean to you?! Why did you seek it?!”

He raised his black sword high in the air.

“Isn’t it because there was something you wanted?! Something that would never be yours without light magic?!”

“Shut up!”

Sain’s black metal clashed with the fiery mantle on Alicia’s arm. They pressed against each other, locked in a standstill.

Alicia screamed back, agony glistening in her eyes.

“So what? Wanting won’t make it happen. The world doesn’t work like that. I could continue to chase after an impossible dream, but I’d only be throwing away years of my life. And for nothing! So why shouldn’t I give up?! Does the act of persevering really justify everything? Even if my efforts ultimately bring me nothing? It doesn’t. And now, I’m done with it all... I never wanted to have my dream... I wanted it to come true!”

“Ugh!”

Sain grunted as Alicia pushed against his blade even harder. Her dam of emotions had burst, and all the misery and sorrow she’d kept pent up crashed into him like an avalanche.

“Even now, I still don’t have a holy sword! I came all this way, and it wasn’t even here! It’s always like this. Every time I find some hope, I’m always let down! And you know what? I’ve learned my damn lesson! I’m done with dreams! They’re always so conveniently placed, as if they’re *just* within reach, but they all turn out to be lies!”

No matter how much her flames raged, the scorching heat was nothing compared to the sharpness of Alicia’s words. Like daggers in his heart, they reverberated painfully until they had become a bitter chorus of shared suffering. She almost seemed to be speaking his words—voicing his grief. However, Sain couldn’t afford to stop here.

“There are no convenient dreams...” he said through gritted teeth. It was a harsh truth, but it was also a simple one. And it was one that he’d known for many, many years. “They’re dreams *because* they’re hard! There *will* be pain. There *will* be disappointment. But that’s only natural because the road to your dreams is paved with hardship! And you knew this, so stop talking like you only just realized! You resolved to walk this path a long time ago!”

“Shut up! Shut up! Go away, go away, go away!”

She hurled another fireball at him. This one, however, was different than before. Not only was it considerably larger, but its surface was devoid of dancing flames. Instead, it had a smooth,

spherical contour; all its energy seemed to be concentrated within. It had an overwhelming presence, almost as though it were threatening to cleanse the entire room through its purifying radiance.

No wonder they picked her to be their puppet.

Sain gave a wry smile at the irony of it all. Her peers deemed her a failure, and yet, there were those who would stop at nothing to have her talents for themselves.

“...Melia, are you ready yet?”

“I sure am. Thanks to all the time you bought, I’m all charged up.”

Melia stepped forward, placing herself between Sain and the approaching fireball. She swung her golden blade backward in a wide arc.

“Spider-silk Sword.”

Light began to gather along the thin sword. At first, the glow covered its entire length. Then, it slowly stretched away from the hilt, leaving only the blade brightened. The process continued, the shimmering sheath narrowing as it stretched further and further away from the sword. When it had condensed into a thin string no wider than silk, she swung.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. There was no sound, and there was no flash. The strand of light moved too fast and was too thin to be seen by the naked eye. Then, the fireball split in two. Melia swung again, this time straight at Alicia.

“Great torrent of black fire, turn all into ashen seas—Velle Flaram!”

At Alicia’s command, a dark wave rushed toward Melia’s silken blade. The maid’s attack was swallowed by the gushing tide of flame, which then continued to surge down the length of the room.

Sain stood, watching until it was mere moments away from devouring him whole. Then, he placed his hand on the collar of his outfit. In one smooth, practiced motion, he pulled off his black coat and held it in front of him. The black scales lining the inside repelled the oncoming flames.

Using his coat out as a shield, he marched against the sea of fire, opening his palm as he pushed forward.

“Darku!”

A bolt of darkness joined the fiery plumes dancing through the air. Weak and slow, it wobbled feebly toward its target.

Thoroughly vexed, Alicia swiped furiously at it with her flames.

“Get out of my sight! Aahhhhhhhhh!”

“Graaaaaaaargh!”

Sain put his head down and charged through the fiery wave straight at Alicia, who ground her teeth together in anger. She raised an arm to the ceiling, producing a massive ball of dark flame above her palm.

“I was— No, I *am* just like you... We’re one and the same!” shouted Sain. Searing pain had filled his throat the second he opened his mouth, but he pressed through the pain. To deliver the necessary words to a girl who sought to wield power, only to have the power wield her.

Alicia swung her arm down, commanding the fireball to descend toward Sain.

“I, too, want something dearly... And it will never be mine unless I become a dark knight!”

The massive fireball came within an inch of Sain before Melia’s golden blade flashed through the air, and the severed fireball exploded in a fountain of blazing sparks that fell back to the ground. As he walked through the fiery rain, every bit of skin on his body screamed with burning pain. But still, he advanced. Unflinching. Unwavering.

He held out his hand.

“Darkuuuu!”

The bolt of darkness, no larger than a pebble, once again closed in on Alicia. It was a farcical sight—a spell more suited to the playgrounds of children than the field of battle—and yet, the pitiful projectile doggedly closed in on Alicia’s unguarded body.

Then, for the first time, it hit its mark.

“Ug—”

Alicia’s knees buckled under her.

The bolt of darkness hit Alicia in the chest and broke with a sharp *pop*. It was trivial in both shape and power, and yet, what was supposed to be a trifling spell sent a jolt through her that shook her to the core.

It made no sense. The gap between their powers should have been insurmountable. Infused with the mysterious blood-red energy, no one was supposed to be able to rival her. When even Melia could do little more than defend herself, Sain should have been an afterthought. He could barely handle beginner magic; Alicia had been certain that nothing he produced could even leave a scratch on her.

So why? Why did my knees give way? Why am I falling right now?

The spell that hit her in the chest was so weak. So insignificant. It could barely manage a bruise. And yet, for some reason, her limbs simply refused to move. She felt her strength seeping away from her body. Then, there was the pain. A deep, aching pain in her chest.

“...It hurts.”

A glistening stream flowed down her cheek.

“Why... From a stupid spell like this...”

She looked down at her hands, trembling, before pressing them to

her chest. Her vision blurred. She squeezed her eyes shut, only to have them fill with tears again. Through the watery lens, she saw the figure of a young boy, burned and battered, but still boldly standing. As she looked at him, questions filled her mind.

Why? Why doesn't he give up? Why, when he's so weak, can he walk so steadily forward?

She felt his gaze. It was fixed on her, sharp and unwavering. She saw his hand. It was held out toward her between lulls in the flames. She heard his steps. They were steady, and they drew ever closer. But she couldn't understand. What kept him going? What drove him to push himself so hard?

And most of all, why couldn't she muster the same strength?

Emotions welled up in her chest. She desperately tried to force them down, but it was like fighting the tide. They swelled higher and higher until she felt them at her throat. Then, there was a soft whimper, and the floodgates broke.

Everything she'd kept bottled up burst out of her as a river of tears. She sobbed, her pain and misery flowing freely down her cheeks. Each throb of her heart pushed more emotions to the surface until she felt as though she was about to explode. At that moment, she heard Sain's voice.

"A year ago, even a stupid spell like this was beyond me... Compared to your power, my stupid spell might be a hundred times weaker, but I worked a hundred times harder for it."

"....."

"And, even then, it's not strong enough to hurt you... But you already know that, don't you? The pain you feel right now is your own doing. The cause of your torture is none other than yourself."

She listened silently to the young boy standing before her—a young boy no older than her and who, shortly after being admitted to the academy, was immediately branded a loser by his peers. And yet, there was a depth to his words that defied his image. The wrenching agony in her heart was undoubtedly her own desperate plea, and with each throb of pain, her own body implored her to wake up. Now, she could hear its voice—her voice. She could once again speak to her own heart.

And it was all thanks to Sain.

"...The only torture here is that get-up of yours."

"...What?!"

Never did Sain imagine the first thing he'd hear from Alicia would be a biting commentary on his fashion sense. Unable to process what he had just heard, he could do nothing but stand there with his mouth agape.

"Scratch that. Everything that comes out of your mouth is torture."

Torture by sheer lameness.”

“But— But—”

“But right now,” said Alicia as she looked up at a stammering Sain, “between the two of us, you’re the cooler one by a longshot. And admitting that, I think... is pretty much admitting defeat.”

The tempest raging within her had calmed. When she looked around, she noticed that the blood-red embers surrounding her had faded as well. Having finally let out all of her negative emotions, she felt as though a dark blanket of clouds had just parted in her heart.

Slowly, she lifted her arm and reached toward Sain. To commend him on his victory. To thank him for his trust.

Jets of crimson flame erupted from the corrupted sword.

“Huh?! Wha—”

Within seconds, they had surrounded Alicia, threatening to swallow her whole.

She jumped up in a panic and tried to run, but the writhing blaze wrapped itself around her arms and legs like living manacles. They felt different than before. They were hot. Unbearably hot. That was when she knew—the flames wanted her dead.

“No!” Sain screamed.

Fire engulfed her, overwhelming her senses. She became lost in a sea of red, seeing and feeling nothing but the excruciating heat that surrounded her.

“Damn it! She refused to be its puppet, so it’s trying to kill her!”

Sain’s urgent cry, a distant echo amidst the roar of the flames, reached her ears. As the deadly inferno closed in and the world faded away, she reached in the direction she had heard his voice, hoping to grasp the last glimmer of a faint ray of hope.

“...Are you really doing this?”

“Yes. This is an unfitting end for someone such as Miss Gold. I will not allow her to die here.”

There were faint murmurs. Footsteps approached.

“...This will leave you forever scarred. Forgive me, *Alicia*.”

The moment Sain spoke her name, the flames consuming her dissipated. The last thing she remembered before passing out was a warm sensation across her left shoulder.



Will you be my knight?

A woman stood before Alicia. Her hair, strands of golden silk, fell smoothly over her lustrously white skin, and slender limbs accentuated her proportionate figure. Like the statue at the far end of the temple, she exuded an aura of otherworldly beauty. Her compassionate gaze, however, was tinged by a hint of loneliness, and her body trembled ever so slightly, as if she was trying very hard to suppress a rising sense of anxiety.

Okay. I will.

The voice of a young boy answered. The woman, hearing his response, beamed.

Alicia felt lost. She couldn't feel the ground beneath her feet. The scene playing out before her made no sense. She didn't understand what she was seeing. Was it a dream? If so, it was a strange one; it didn't seem to be at all founded in her reality.

The whole world suddenly blurred around her, and the scenery changed. Now, she was in the middle of a vast expanse of nature. Looking down, she found her hands—rather, the hands of the person whose eyes she was seeing through. They held a sword, which was impaled in the carcass of a monster.

Phew. I think that's the last of them.

A-Aah! Sain, dear! What do you think you're doing?!

Huh? Well, I'm fighting off monsters...

Fighting off monsters?! Y-You're too young to be doing that! I think it'd be better if you, um, you know, waited until you're a little older!

But the monsters are causing everyone a lot of trouble. Besides, I'm strong, so I have to do it.

Hnngh... W-Well, make sure you don't push yourself too hard, okay? Because if you get hurt, I'm going to cry. I'm going to cry for a whole week.

Please don't.

The boy and the woman continued their loving bantering. At times, their exchanges were so comically juvenile that Alicia couldn't help but giggle.

Suddenly, the world blurred again, and the scenery followed suit.

Praise the holy knight!

The cheering came from all around her, and its sound was deafening.

Praise the holy knight!

Long live Sir Sain!

The roar of the crowd seemed to shake the very sky. At the center of the commotion was a horse-drawn cart that leisurely made its way

down a stone road. All around it, people threw up their hands in celebration, fervently cheering the young boy who was seated inside. It was hard to tell when he was looking up, but when he lowered his gaze, Alicia could see he had a sturdier frame than when he'd met the golden-haired woman. The young boy had grown.

You sure are loved.

The woman with the compassionate gaze approached the young boy and stood at his side. The young boy smiled back, his eyes equally kind.

You are too.

Huh?

Loved by them, goddess... They love you too.

The woman smiled at the boy's words. There was gladness in that smile. But there was also the slightest hint of sadness.

I do hope so...

Again, everything went black for a second before the dream took on a different setting.

You are the pride of Lightridge, the finest knight to have graced our Holy Kingdom.

Alicia found herself atop an elegant red carpet. Around her were a number of people dressed like nobility. They were all looking in her direction, their gazes filled with admiration and respect.

You are our hope.

So long as you are here, peace shall reign in this kingdom.

From this day forward, please use your powers not only for the sake of our kingdom, but for the good of every person in the world... And, most of all, for yourself. We will always be cheering you on.

The vision continued to flicker, snapping faster and faster through a slideshow of sights and people.

I will never forget what you have done for me. I swear that I will repay your kindness one day.

Oh, praise the good knight. Thank you for saving our village.

We are deeply indebted to you. I do hope we shall meet again.

When I grow up, I want to be a hero like the holy knight and help everyone!

Dearest savior, thank you for saving our people. Please accept our heartfelt gratitude.

She saw a lovely young girl, then a bold male adolescent. There was a kindly woman, an innocent child, and a wrinkly old lady. They were all joined in their praise and appreciation. She knew that these had to be people the young boy had met during his travels. He had walked countless miles, and saved countless lives.

Now, he was beginning another journey. The carpet turned from red to green, its woolen fibers replaced by soft grass. As the young boy

climbed a gentle hill, the goddess spoke to him.

Sain, dear, you really are terrific. You'll become the best holy knight there ever was.

That's not true.

You will. I'm sure of it. After all, I've known so many holy knights, and none of them were as gentle and warmhearted as you. The people shower you with so much love. Love that really does come from the bottom of their hearts. ...All they offer me is worship.

Alicia watched as the young boy glanced at the goddess. What he saw in the sideward contour of her shapely features, she did not know. What she did know, however, was that she felt a pang of heartache at her downcast eyes and somber smile. In that moment, a single thought occupied her mind: I don't want her to look so sad.

Sain, dear, is there anything you want? You know, a wish of some kind?

Not especially. What about you, goddess?

Me? I... Hm, well... I... I wish—

Upon hearing her answer, Alicia's eyes opened wide. The young boy must have shared her surprise, because the next thing she heard was an echo of his heart, shared with no one but himself.

Goddess... The truth is... I do have a wish. Just a single one.

The world blackened, and the scene changed once again.

She was in a very large room. The carpets on the ground had intricate patterns woven into them, and premium furnishings lined the walls.

You... want to quit being the holy knight? The woman's eyes were large and incredulous. *Wh-Why? Why would— W-Was it me? Did I do something wrong?! I'm so sorry if I did...*

It's not that. I just have a new goal now.

A... new goal?

The young boy answered with a look of unbending pride.

I'm going to become the dark knight!

D-Dark... knight?

Indeed. Therefore, I shall no longer wield your powers with reckless abandon. From now on, except for times of dire need, I shall keep my powers as a holy knight sealed away. Sorry, goddess, but that's how it's going to be.

Wh-Why are you doing this all of a sudden?

Why? Hah! Why else? Because... the dark knight is just so much cooler!

Huh?!

The woman's jaw almost hit the ground in shock. There was, as far as anyone could tell, no rhyme or reason to the boy's opinion. It was pure subjective bias. She flailed her arms in protest as she

desperately tried to talk him out of his ludicrous decision.

Th-That's not true at all! The holy knight is much, much cooler! And it suits you so much more, Sain, dear! I promise!

Sorry, but my mind is set.

Having her suggestion so flatly refused, the woman bit her lip. Her shoulders trembled, and there was the beginnings of a sob in her voice.

I'm not okay with this... No way... I'm never ever going to be okay with this!

Angry tears streamed down her cheeks as she raised her voice in objection once more.

Stupid, stupid Sain! I hate you! Waaaaaaaah!

After a terrible bout of bawling, the woman vanished. The boy let out a quiet sigh, his lonesome figure accentuated by the emptiness of the room. Just then, a door to the room opened, and a black-haired girl appeared. Her uniform suggested she was his attendant.

I see you're done with the talk. Hm... From the looks of it, she didn't take it very well, did she?

...She didn't. And why should she? I mean, I'm basically betraying her. Careful. You're breaking character.

Oh, whoops. Ahem. What I've done amounts to nothing if not an act of betrayal. There.

The girl regarded him with a flat expression.

What? This isn't as easy as it looks, okay?

Then you could just, you know, stop doing it.

But I sound so much more like a dark knight this way! said the boy, his eyes brimming with enthusiasm.

The black-haired girl sighed.

You know you're throwing away everything, right? Everything you've built up... It's all going to mean nothing if you do this.

So be it.

The wealth. The power. The fame and glory. Your feats and achievements. The trust you've earned and the bonds you've made. Everything... is going to be gone. And you'll be starting over from the very bottom; a nameless nobody with nothing to his name.

So be it.

...You're letting go of a life of peace and happiness.

So be it. The boy looked the girl straight in the eyes. *There is something I want, and it will never be mine unless I walk this path.*

The boy's words roused something deep within Alicia's heart. It felt familiar. It was something she knew well. And then, she remembered: It was resolve.

We're the same...

Throughout her life, she'd had countless other options. All kinds

of roads had been available to her. She could have chosen to learn fire magic. She could have walked away from magic entirely and led a more peaceful life. If she wanted to, she could have changed course at any time. However, she hadn't. She'd chosen this life, and with it, all its adversity and hardships.

The reason was simple: Just like the boy before her, there was something she wanted, and it would never be hers unless she walked this path.

In that moment, their thoughts seemed to meld as their voices echoed in perfect harmony.

What I truly want is...

As they each put their resolve to words, everything faded to black once more.

"...Huh?"

Alicia opened her eyes to a dirt-colored ceiling. She was lying flat on her back and her head felt heavy. She let out a pained groan as she slowly sat up, pressing her fingers against her temples.

"Ah, I see you're awake," said Sain.

He stood above her in all his ebony glory. For a while, she simply looked at him, his face blending together with that of the boy from her dream. He raised an eyebrow.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, um, nothing. I just had a weird dream."

"It wasn't a dream. What you saw were probably my memories."

"...What?"

"Honestly, I don't even know where to begin. But now that things have come to this, some explanations are definitely in order. I'll tell you everything, but allow me to start with the most important part." His expression took on a solemn air. "My real name is Sain Forth. I am the current holy knight."

A long silence passed, during which Alicia made no attempt at a response. She showed no surprise. If anything, her expression was that of someone chewing a particularly flavorless piece of gum.

"I see you're not surprised. I assume that means you did indeed see my memories."

"...I am surprised. I'm just having trouble processing everything after all that happened," she said as she rubbed her face with her hand. "I understand that you're the holy knight. Like, I get it up here," she said, pointing to her head, "but I don't *really* get it, you know? It's true that I was seeing someone's memories—yours, probably—but for me, it doesn't feel real. Like, there's that Sain, and then there's this Sain. And the Sain that I remember... is you. The one that I've gotten to know over these past couple of days. Well, you're the one that made more of an impression on me, at least."

“Oh? Mm-hm-hm. Now that just made my day,” said Sain with a grin. Between his past self that he wished to erase and his current self striving to become a dark knight, Alicia had gravitated toward the latter. It felt like vindication. “However, I’m getting ahead of myself a bit. Let’s start with you. How are you feeling? Are all of your memories intact?”

“...Yeah.”

Alicia averted her eyes. The subtle gesture told Sain all he needed to know. She remembered everything: The fact that they had entered the labyrinth searching for the holy sword that would allow her to use light magic; that what they discovered wasn’t a holy sword, but something far more nefarious; and, most of all, that she had been corrupted by the evil presence and tried to harm her friends.

“Don’t blame yourself. What we faced was a monster that invades people’s hearts and bends them to its will. It wasn’t your fault, Miss Gold. We were unfortunate to run into it. That’s all.”

“That’s not true... I was conscious. I knew what I was doing.”

“What makes those monsters especially dangerous is that they control not the mind but the heart. I’d imagine it made you see some particularly unpleasant visions. It’s almost like a kind of natural disaster that brainwashes people. It wasn’t anyone’s fault—rather, if anyone was at fault, it was definitely me.” Sain lowered his head in apology. “I’m sorry. The truth is that I’d known in advance that the thing was hiding in the labyrinth. It was my mistake to not tell you beforehand, and I apologize.”

Once Sain had finished explaining, Alicia looked to Melia, who nodded. It became clear that she was the only one who was clueless.

“...It was for my sake, right?”

“Huh?”

“We haven’t known each other long, but I feel like I have a pretty good handle on you. You’re not the kind of person who’d put someone in danger for no reason,” said Alicia, her voice brimming with certainty.

Sain fell silent. She was right. In fact, he’d intended to keep the truth from her until the very end. Alicia continued:

“That’s why I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry... For hurting you. Both of you.”

Alicia lowered her head as well, resulting in a rather awkward stalemate. Both of them wished to convey their regret, but neither was willing to look up first for fear of lessening the sincerity of their apology. Melia regarded the absurd contest with a sigh.

“Let’s just say it’s a tie, all right? You’re both equally sorry.”

Her suggestion elicited a grimace from both contestants.

“But that would imply...”

“But that means...”

“Okay, okay. You can keep comparing bowing angles, but let’s wait until *after* we get back to the academy, all right? Considering we’re still in the labyrinth, I’d appreciate it if we all behaved like sensible people.”

Melia was, of course, absolutely right. Though they were in a safe zone, they hadn’t brought any rations with them. The clock was ticking, and they still had a labyrinth to explore. There was no time to waste.

“...Fair point.”

“...Yeah.”

The apologetic pair exchanged nods before Alicia’s eyes were suddenly drawn to her surroundings. A frown wrinkled her forehead.

“On that note, where are we?”

“A safe zone. My maid and I found it while you were unconscious. We’re not too far from where we found the fake holy sword,” explained Sain. He then fixed Alicia with a serious look. “Listen, Miss Gold. What I am about to tell you will have permanent consequences. Once you learn the truth about our situation, there’s no going back. So brace yourself. Consider your peaceful and ordinary days gone for good. From now on, Miss Gold, you shall walk a most unusual path with us, and live a most extraordinary life.”

“...More like you’d better tell me. If you try to keep me in the dark after all this, I swear I’ll bite you. So? What’s the deal with you two? And what was that dark red energy?”

Seeing that Alicia had made up her mind, Sain began to explain.

“Allow me to start from the beginning. Once again, I am the holy knight, and my maid serves as my attendant.”

“Well, yeah. It’s pretty obvious that Melia’s your attendant. I know that much. Actually, wait... By ‘attendant,’ do you mean she gets some sort of special power from the holy knight?”

“Indeed. The holy knight can share his power with others, thereby creating allies known as attendants. As a sign of having received this power, an attendant will receive a holy mark that appears somewhere on his or her body.”

Sain gestured to Melia with his eyes. In response, she pulled up her skirt, revealing the pattern of a dagger and shield on her thigh. Alicia observed the mark with a reverent expression.

“So this is a holy mark... Wait... How come it’s... *there*?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, look... Isn’t this, like... sort of indecent?”

“What?! N-No! The spot where the holy mark appears is completely random! I didn’t choose to put it there!”

“Master Sain held me down and carved it into me himself.”

“Damn it, maid! Now is not the time for your shenanigans! Besides, *you* were the one who threatened *me*!”

“Did I? I don’t remember doing that,” Melia replied with a shrug.

Sain dropped his head in his hands and groaned. Then, he started with a look of realization and spun toward Alicia.

“Miss Gold, this concerns you as well. Look at your left shoulder.”

She did as she was told, pulling aside her shirt to reveal her left shoulder.

“What is this...” she said as her eyes went wide.

Her shoulder was marked in the same style as Melia’s thigh. Though the pattern was different, it was undeniably a holy mark, signifying that she was now an attendant as well.

“In order to save you from the corruption, I had to make you my attendant. Unless I die, that mark will never fade... I’m sorry. I’ve left you scarred for life.”

Sain lowered his head again, but Alicia merely gave a resigned sigh.

“Better than dying, right? Thank you, Sain. For saving my life.” Her words were gentle, brushing aside his apology to instead offer her gratitude.

His expression turned pensive. There was no denying that she would have been the most surprised by the sudden turn of events, and yet Alicia kept a clear head and stood her ground. There was definitely something to be said about that.

Eventually, he figured a response was appropriate and attempted a smile, but even he wasn’t sure whether it came across as more wry than glad.

“Let’s talk while we walk. Our time is limited,” he said as he turned to leave.

The two girls followed, and the three made their way to leave the safe zone. As they proceeded down a passage, Sain kept his gaze forward as he spoke.

“That blood-red energy you saw is known as Chaos.”

“Chaos?”

Sain nodded.

“Chaos is a concept... No, it’s more like a phenomenon. It has existed since time immemorial, and is responsible for creating everything in existence. From the magical energy we employ for our spells to the monsters that are a threat to people’s lives; everything was once a product of Chaos.”

“It... created magical energy and monsters? H-Hold on a minute. I was told in class that those had existed since the world began.”

“That’s the official story, because the truth can be... inconvenient at times. Like I said, from this day on, you’ll be walking an

extraordinary path—one that takes you beyond the pages of your textbooks. In this world, common sense will be your foe. In fact, you should throw it aside entirely. Keep an open mind, and prepare to question everything you assume to be true.”

Alicia listened with pursed lips as Sain spoke with the impassive certainty of a lecturer. His matter-of-fact tone imparted some sorely needed credence to what basically amounted to claims of vast conspiracy.

“...Okay. So let’s say Chaos *did* create magical energy and monsters. Does that mean Chaos is some kind of deity? Does it watch over the world like Her Holiness?”

“No. There is nothing divine about Chaos, and it is by no means benevolent. If anything, Chaos is an enemy to the gods.” Sain looked up with an air of solemnity. “Chaos has no will, and, therefore, no morality. It cares not whether its creations are good or evil; it simply creates indefinitely. It is a phenomenon that can bring forth both miracles and calamities. That is why the two gods sealed it away before catastrophe could befall the world.

“However... the seal proved imperfect. Though it succeeded in stopping the main body from functioning, it also left residues scattered throughout the world. Though these are mere shadows of the core, they are still too dangerous to fall into the hands of man. It is imperative that they are dealt with, but the two gods are occupied with maintaining the seal... That is why they decided to select agents to go in their place. These agents are, of course, the holy knight and the dark knight.”

Alicia swallowed dryly. The greatness of the knights was no secret—it was widely known that they were directly chosen by the gods. Their purpose, however, was shrouded in mystery.

Why did they exist? The elusive answer to that question was now Alicia’s to keep.

“The holy knight and dark knight... They’re both people selected by the gods to defeat Chaos...?”

“Correct. There are those who believe the knights are saviors sent by the gods; others believe they are mere tools created for the purpose of spreading religion. You may have heard some of these claims yourself. What I told you just now, however, is the truth.”

Sain paused, allowing Alicia to process his words before continuing.

“Now, let’s come back to the present... The blood-red energy that consumed you is, of course, the Chaos that I speak of. While you were under its influence, you might have noticed it was desperately struggling to break free of its seal. Normally, Chaos is extremely elusive, and rarely shows up near people. After all, a trail of sightings

would easily lead us to its location, and, therefore, its demise. They are cunning and cowardly entities, and unfortunately... that clouded my judgment. I hadn't expected them to attack so directly. The fact that they chose to, however, is a testament to how highly they valued your powers, Miss Gold. You were an opportunity they couldn't pass up."

"What do you mean by—"

Her question was cut short by a loud rumbling that shook through the ground beneath them. Sain calmly slowed to a stop, Alicia staggering a little beside him. The source of the quake was up ahead... and it was close.

"What was that?"

"That," Sain said, his eyes narrowing, "is the equivalent of Chaos cracking its knuckles. The core that was hiding in the labyrinth must have noticed us and realized it wasn't getting away without a fight." He started walking forward again. "Up ahead lies the Chaos that brainwashed you... And we're going to go exterminate it."

As he mentioned the Chaos, he stole a glance at Alicia. As he expected, her face was awash with concern. His expression softened.

"It's all right. No one will force you to do anything you're not comfortable doing. Hunting down Chaos is a duty of the holy knight, but their attendants have no such obligation. However, so long as you are an attendant to the holy knight, you will be involved in matters of Chaos sooner or later. Therefore... I ask that you come with me. Even if only to observe."

"Oh, would you quit it with the whole guilty conscience thing already?" snapped Alicia. "Look, I never considered myself a victim here, so you can drop the whole offender act, too. Besides, isn't Melia going too? If she is, then so am I."

"...Well, that's because holy knight or not, I'm Master Sain's attendant first and foremost."

"Same goes for me, then. Holy knight or not, I'm your friend first and foremost."

The sureness with which Alicia made her declaration took Sain by surprise. The shock, however, soon melted into a warm smile.

"Fair enough," he said, flourishing his coat behind him. "Let's go fast. Maybe we can slug it in the face before it's even finished warming up."

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Sain could hear his heart pound between footsteps. Was it because he was running so quickly, or because he was nervous for the oncoming confrontation? He wasn't sure. In fact, it was probably both.

He continued to dash through the labyrinth with a certainty that

belied their ostensible purpose of exploration. Never once did he slacken his pace. The holy knight's power was guiding him toward the location of the Chaos with pinpoint accuracy.

Alicia kept by his side, matching his speed.

"Hey, Sain."

"What is it?" he answered as they ran.

"You know how... I saw your memories? When I did, all sorts of things flowed into my head. I felt your resolve, and I felt your loss. ...Sain. Why are you trying to become a dark knight? Is it because—"

"Because it's so cool!"

Sain interjected before she could finish, continuing into a ramble.

"The dark knight is so damn cool! The dark aura, the ominous appearance, the demonic power that repels all those who approach... It all speaks to my very soul! And that's reason enough!" he shouted through heavy gasps for air.

His eyes never once shifted from the direction they were fixed in—forward. But even without looking, Sain knew that Alicia had held her tongue. She no doubt had so much to ask. So much to say. Yet, in that moment, she allowed herself only four words.

"...I guess it is."

He understood the reason for her silence. As a witness to his memories, she surely knew the true reason behind his desire to become a dark knight. Nevertheless, she refrained from prying. It was an act of kindness that he could only repay with wordless gratitude.

"There!" he shouted as he suddenly slid to a halt. To his side, Alicia followed suit.

A large, open space stretched before them, teeming with monsters the deep red of blood. Some were bird-like and circled above, flapping their asymmetrical wings. Others resembled fish that floated through the air, tail-like tendrils dangling below them. Even the four-legged creature that Alicia had fought roamed here in droves. A single one had proven too much for her to handle, yet now there were dozens. The very sight caused her to take a step back in spite of herself.

"The residues of Chaos can be categorized based on their shape and attributes. Those up ahead are known as Beasts of Chaos, and occupy the lowest position in their hierarchy. They're foot soldiers, more or less."

"Are you kidding me? They're the weakest? Isn't that the thing Melia and I fought?"

"They're the weakest form of Chaos, but they're still far stronger than regular monsters. After all, what powers them isn't magical energy, which is but a product of Chaos, but Chaos itself."

Sain described the strength of their enemies with clinical indifference before taking a casual step forward. Immediately, every

Beast in the room directed its gaze toward him. The tension in the air thickened at once, and yet Sain continued his nonchalant stroll toward the glowering creatures, his manner easy and relaxed.

“But in the end, they’re nothing more than mere monsters.”

“H-Hey! Sain?!” Alicia yelled in a panic as the defenseless Sain strode carelessly into enemy territory. The Beasts began to growl and snarl in unison, stirring her worries into a frenzy.

The last thing she heard before the howls crescendoed into a deafening chorus of roars was the calm certainty of Sain’s voice.

“They lack a most crucial element—intellect.”

The room appeared to melt into a crimson blur as every monster in the room pounced toward him at once.

“*Melia!*”

“*Second Gift—Holy Sinking Blade!*”

A golden sword flashed into existence, tracing a blinding arc through the air. In an instant, death washed over the room. Bird-like, fish-like and beast-like; all were equally defenseless against the reaper of light.

“Hm... Not that many took the bait.”

“Making Miss Alicia an attendant probably tipped them off about your power. That said, their impression of you probably still hovers around ‘a little stronger than average.’”

“Ah. That’s an unexpected advantage of wearing seals. How fortunate for us.”

Many of the creatures that had approached them were now cautiously backing away. But a few lingered, staring them down with eyes that exuded confidence.

Sain turned to his dumbfounded observer, Alicia.

“The weapon Melia currently wields is the power bestowed upon attendants of the holy knight. Miss Gold, this power has also been bestowed upon you.”

“Me... too?”

Then, Sain scratched his chin, suddenly deep in thought.

“Hm, actually... I might as well have her give it a try right now,” he mused. “Nothing beats hands-on experience, after all.”

Melia, who had overheard Sain talking to himself, walked over to Alicia, rising up onto her toes to whisper in her ear.

“Miss Alicia, about that... Just so you know, this is going to give you the shivers. You’d better brace yourself.”

Alicia responded with a confused look before turning back to Sain. He fixed his eyes on her, and the sudden intensity of his gaze caused her to start a little.

“Here I go... *Alicia.*”

“*Eeeek!*”

As soon as her name was called, a piercing shriek escaped Alicia's lips. She hopped on the spot and clutched at her chest, her cheeks reddening.

It took her a few seconds to process what had just happened. Then, as her thoughts gathered, her face reddened further with rage. She stomped toward Sain, yanking him in by the collar.

"What the hell was that for?!" she screamed, shaking him violently with both hands.

"Gueeeeh?!"

Sain frantically gestured for her to stop, but to no avail.

"C-Calm down... Calm down and take a look at yourself..." he croaked.

Only then did she release him. Her cheeks were still flushed, and she narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously before glancing down at her chest. Slowly, her eyes widened with surprise.

"What is this...?"

"Those who become my attendants have their powers unleashed when I speak their name."

"Of course, in Master Sain's case, his *unleashing* happens just a tiny bit too easily. His powers are so strong that he can apparently turn compatible people into attendants just by saying their name. He's a lean, mean, attendant-making machine."

"Huh... Now I get why you always give people nicknames..."

"Well, erm, yes. That would be why."

"And not getting to say anyone's name makes you sad, which is why you name your plants and talk to them like they're people, right?"

"Waaaaaaaah! No one else needed to know that!"

As if on cue, one of the Beasts let out a ferocious growl and rushed at them. Its three front and two hind legs gave it a peculiar tumbling gait.

"Ah, good timing. Go ahead. Try your hand on that."

"T-Try my hand? You want me to fight *that*? How? Isn't it immune to everything but dark and light magic?"

"And you, Alicia, can use light magic. As a matter of fact, you've been using it all along."

Alicia looked at him, speechless and wide-eyed.

"The fire magic you thought you've been using... It was, in fact, light magic. All of it. And now... it's time for you to unleash its true potential. Trust in yourself, Alicia, and scream those words you hear in your heart!"

Sain punctuated his command with a dramatic flourish.

Alicia looked down at her hands. At first, Sain's words seemed like an encouraging but ultimately impossible request. What was she to

do? As she stared at her palms, however, she felt a mysterious power radiating from them. It was invisible, but it had a definite presence. She focused on the power, feeling it swirl in her hands.

Slowly, something welled up inside her. It passed through her chest, instilling confidence in her heart. By the time it reached her head, it had roused the warrior in her, and all traces of doubt vanished from her gaze. Her eyes blazed with newfound determination.

The large Beast bared its vicious fangs as it barrelled toward her. She reached out her slender arm; an arm that seemed frail compared to the monstrous creature before her.

Sain, however, knew that her delicate appearance masked a tremendous strength. He could feel the enormous power surging through her outstretched limb and, just as the Beast opened its gaping maw, an explosion of light filled the room.

“Poht Teurch, here I bear the attendant’s mark. Seventh Gift—Holy Weaving Torch!”

Pure, blinding radiance swelled outward at an unimaginable speed, its overwhelming brightness threatening to erase from the world every shadow, every hue—even the very concept of color. Alicia’s hand had become a boundary, beyond which was an alien realm of complete and total whiteness.

When the world finally came back into focus, a conical object had appeared in her hand. Its base faced away from her, narrowing to a thinner end that rested in her palm. Adorning it were smooth lines that extended from the midpoint toward the outer end, meeting in intricate patterns that resembled a crown. From a distance, it looked as though a castle of white spires had risen from the palm of her hand.

It was a torch, and from its apex emanated a holy light.

“This is...”

Her mouth remained open, but no words came. She simply stared in stunned silence at the whitened flame glowing vigorously at the cone’s base, as if light itself had solidified into palpable matter.

“...A power known as holy fire,” said Sain, finishing her sentence. “Even amongst users of light magic, it is an extremely rare ability. However, it is no mere flame. Its true value... is the power of purification. It has the potential to purge corruption—to cleanse that which has been tainted.

“As an ability, purification is immensely potent, but it is difficult to predict when the power will awaken. This is because, without a clear target to purify, any attempts to activate it will end in vain. This, Alicia, is why your fire was only effective against monsters. Monsters were created by Chaos, and bear its mark of corruption.”

“W-Wait, then that means I...”

“Congratulations.” He beamed at her with heartfelt bliss. “Your dream came true.”

Alicia looked from Sain to the torch in her hand, and a tear fell from the corner of her eye. Then another, and another. Soon, a shimmering stream flowed down her cheeks, and her lips quivered a little as they curved up into a smile. Then, she quickly rubbed the back of her hand across her cheek.

“Okay, not the time for this,” she said with a sniffle. “First, we take care of this. Crying can come later.”

Her eyes looked as though they’d taken on a new coat of polish. Gone was the matte finish of worry, replaced by the smooth sheen of confidence. She fixed the Beasts of Chaos with a level gaze. Beside her, Sain did the same, his lips touched by a relieved smile.

“Holy fire is effective against Chaos as well. Before your full awakening, its power had been subdued. Now, however... Well, it might as well be something else entirely.”

“Did you know about my power from the very start?”

“The first time I noticed something strange was when you touched my coat... and you were perfectly fine. Also, over the past couple of days, the seals I’ve been wearing kept breaking for some reason. And so I started to suspect that your magic was the cause. Finally, when you showed me your light magic in person, it pretty much confirmed my suspicions.”

Sain glanced at the vast array of trinket-like seals hanging from his body. They all served the same purpose—to suppress the power of light—and were created by condensing the power of darkness into solid masses. Holy fire, being a form of light magic, was therefore effective against the darkness in the seals.

“What you probably didn’t realize is that these accessories I’m wearing aren’t for show. They’re all seals that suppress the power of light.”

One of the Beasts lunged at them as he spoke, shooting a jet of flame from its mouth.

“Also, remember those fell dragon scales I said were lining my coat? Well...” He quickly turned, sending the tail of his coat fluttering up behind him. It met the flame and repelled it without a scratch. “They’re real.”

Fell dragon scales could negate most attacks—they had even protected Sain from one of the spells Alicia had used when she was brainwashed. However, they were not objects to be handled lightly. Infused with the lingering malice of a fallen dragon, the scales could corrupt weak minds with a single touch. When Alicia had tugged on his coat, the power of purification dormant within her shielded her from harm.

Her ability to purge sources of corruption likely made her immune to all forms of mental corruption, the only exception being when she was mentally weakened, which would leave her vulnerable. Chaos had taken advantage of this, launching a psychological assault on her through a sequence of cruel illusions. Only then did they manage to pry open the gate to her heart.

But so long as she stayed true to herself and kept a strong heart, she was untouchable.

“Take pride in your accomplishment. This power was sleeping within you all along, all I did was give it a slight push. Can you sense it flowing through you? Doesn’t it feel familiar? That’s because it’s *your* power.”

Alicia’s purification ability manifested as holy fire which, as its name suggested, was indeed fire and could be controlled in the same way. Therefore, when wielding her new power, Alicia would inherit the proficiency she’d previously acquired in fire magic. She may not have chosen or even wanted to learn fire magic, but it was a familiar power that had accompanied her throughout her life. Sain had no doubt that she would take to it like an old friend.

“Hey, Sain?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.” She offered him a gentle smile. “I mean it. Thank you.”

The tender expression was almost unbecoming of Alicia, and Sain found himself transfixed by a side of her he’d never seen before.

“I want to help you... From now on, I’m going to stay—and fight—by your side,” she said, her eyes still glistening with tears.

“Just for the record, it’s not all sunshine and roses,” Melia interjected. “We go to other continents sometimes, and, depending on where the Chaos is hiding, we might even have to wear disguises and infiltrate hideouts. It can be a real nuisance.”

“Wow. Coming from you, that’s no joke. Thanks for the heads up, but I’ll be fine. I didn’t spend my whole life struggling against these shackles just to get cold feet when they finally came off. I’m not backing down.” She tightened her grip on her torch and looked from Melia to the monsters. “Well, then. Show me how it’s done, chief. I’ll follow your lead.”

“Mmm. I suppose some orientation is indeed in order. All right. Watch closely, rookie.”

The two moved together. Alicia boldly charged straight toward the Beasts, making no attempt to hide or take cover, while Melia used the Beasts’ own shadows against them, weaving in and out of their blind spots as she advanced. Their time together in the labyrinth had allowed them each to understand the other’s style of fighting.

A winged monster dove at them from above. Alicia hopped aside,

evading the attack and continuing onward toward a more densely packed group of creatures—a spot where she could wipe out as many monsters as possible in one swing. The winged monster tried to give chase, but was intercepted by the flash of a blade. Before its headless body could even touch the ground, Melia's figure was gone.

She flashed from monster to monster, leaving a trail of decapitated corpses in her wake. When she'd attracted the attention of a sufficiently large mob, she turned to Alicia.

"Whenever you're ready."

"Gotcha! Eat this, you ugly, nasty brutes!"

The very manifestation of sanctity erupted from her in an expanding sphere of purging holy fire, impossibly dense and mercilessly pure. It swallowed countless monsters in its path, forging a zone of complete and utter whiteness. And at its center stood Alicia, torch held high above her head.

When the blinding light eventually faded, the surrounding rocks, rubble, walls and floor showed not even the slightest sign of damage. Even the dust in the air seemed untouched. Everything appeared the same as before, aside from one thing: The hordes of monsters surrounding her had vanished, erased so completely from existence that not a single speck of crimson remained.

"Wow... Talk about bringing in the heavy artillery..." Melia quipped. "I'm pretty sure that's the kind of firepower you'd see from a siege engine, not a person."

In terms of sheer firepower, Melia was completely outclassed. With enough practice, it was likely that Alicia would even be able to improve her control, affording her more flexibility with her power and allowing her to use it as more of a weapon than a bomb.

The new rookie turned out to be quite a valuable ally.

A cacophony of raucous shrieks broke out among the remaining Beasts. The ground rumbled, and the walls and ceiling were suddenly covered in blood-red circles—holes in the very fabric of space. From them clambered more Beasts, each more menacing than the last.

"They called for reinforcements," Melia noted flatly.

"They'll need them, because I'm just getting started."

Melia and Alicia stared down the crimson legion, their numbers newly replenished. Monsters filled every last inch of their view, and yet neither attendant showed any hint of concern. Instead, they charged confidently into the thick of battle.

Sain watched the girls from afar and, seeing the long trail of dead monsters in their wake, let out a short breath of relief. Then, with the calm leisure of an evening stroll, he began to walk forward.

As he moved, he placed his hand over the clasp of one of his silver trinkets, and, one by one, began removing the accessories that dangled

from his torso. For each one he removed, a burst of unseeable power surged from within him. Several nearby Beasts who had been poised to pounce froze in their tracks before scampering away in fear, and even the ones fighting his attendants paused for a moment to glance in his direction.

"It doesn't matter how many there are. You'll need more than grunts to kill us," Sain said, seemingly to nothing in particular. "How about you come out and do some work yourself?"

His words hung in the air for a brief moment. Then, as if responding to his request, the ground began to rumble and geysers of blood-red energy erupted from the depths below. From these openings crept crimson veins, snaking their way across the floor and up the walls, eventually reaching as high as the ceiling.

As he cast aside his final seal, Sain tapped the ground with his right foot. The gesture caused a spidery strand of approaching red energy to diverge to either side, as though avoiding direct confrontation. Eventually, the blood-red streaks covered every surface in a vast web of energy. Then, all at once, they swelled.

The engorged veins pulled themselves free and gathered in a tangled mass at the center of the room, taking large chunks of earth and rock with them. The walls and ceiling began to crumble, and the very space they stood in seemed to contort. Everything, from the dirt underfoot to the lights overhead, were consumed by the swirling mass until finally, a terrible *something* emerged.

"Ah, finally. The boss of all the Chaos plaguing this labyrinth," said Sain, his eyes narrowing. "An Incarnation."

An Incarnation was a step up on the Chaos hierarchy, making it superior to the Beasts they'd been fighting. It was almost humanoid from the waist up, with a beard, two arms, three wings, and the fangs of a dragon. Its bottom half, however, was more alien, with two pulsating legs that resembled bundles of plant roots. Viscous, blood-red mud dripped from its body, and its slimy eyes rolled around in their sockets before settling on Sain.

The Incarnation let loose a shrill, gurgling howl. The noise was chilling, sounding less like the roar of a Beast and more like the anguished scream of a human. Alicia involuntarily clenched her teeth at the demented sight.

"It's still too early for the two of you to take on an Incarnation," said Sain, regarding the girls with a gentle smile. "Close your eyes if you're scared. To be frank, I'd rather you did... What I'm about to do isn't something I like showing people."

From here on, he had to rely on borrowed strength. The time had come for him to use a power that he wasn't particularly fond of—a power both awesome in its might and seductive in its potential. There

was something inherently alluring about absolute power, to the extent that even those who knew about Sain's dream might have found themselves falling prey to its siren song. That was why he was averse to having an audience. He took no pleasure in flaunting a power that wasn't his.

Alicia, however, cared little for his stoicism.

"When I was brainwashed, you never looked away. You stayed with me. And now, it's my turn... If you ever become intoxicated with your own power, I'll slap some sense back into you, don't you worry. Go out there and do your thing, because I've got your back."

Her words washed over Sain like a wave of comfort. His chest warmed and he somehow felt... lighter. As though a small weight had been taken from him. There was an unmissable integrity to the girl standing before him; her words reached the heart because they came *from* the heart. The warmth grew, almost as if a fire had been lit inside him. This was, he realized, what it meant to have friends. Friends who gave each other motivation. Friends who had each other's backs.

"In that case... I suppose there's only one thing left to do." He took a decisive step forward. "Let's end this. Now."

He let go, and the floodgates opened. The invisible energy that had been leaking from him immediately took on a golden hue as all of the power he had been suppressing rushed out at once. Slowly, his figure began to glow until he was completely enveloped in a saintly aura.

"Sanctuary."

A sharp flash shrouded his black coat. The next moment, it was gone, replaced by a mantle of purest white. His radiance continued to intensify, climaxing in a blinding burst of light before suddenly condensing onto his back. When the gleam eventually faded, his mantle was embossed with the mark of a cross.

"I am the holy knight. If the blessing of the goddess is that which makes a holy sword, then all swords I hold in my hand," he declared with conviction, "shall be holy swords."

The dye in his hair peeled away, restoring its original golden luster, and the sheath of the sword dangling at his waist had turned from the darkest black to a lustrous white. He drew it by the handle, revealing a blade that shined with golden brilliance.

The radiance he bears is the grace of the gods. The cross he shoulders is the symbol of justice. He is—

"...The holy knight." A faint whisper escaped Alicia.

The Incarnation was frozen in place, as if the light had robbed it of its ability to move. It was, in fact, gripped by fear, for it had learned Sain's true identity. This knowledge, however, had come too

late. Its fate was now sealed.

“■■■■■■■■—!”

The Incarnation let out a twisted howl. The crimson roots that ran along the walls began throbbing as if they were arteries feeding a racing heart. The creature's top half swelled in size, sharp fangs jutting from its now bloated jaw which dripped with blood-red mud. It opened its mouth wide and charged at Sain.

The Incarnation's gaping maw filled Sain's view, but he didn't even bat an eye. Instead, he simply took another step forward.

“Creature of the ersatz blade, allow me to show you the real thing.”

His hand began to glow with an iridescent stream of colors, growing brighter and brighter until it took on the form of a sword shining with an intensity that stung the eyes.

“This,” he said as he raised his golden blade, “is a holy sword!”

As he swung down at the Incarnation, a towering arc of light rushed out of his sword, instantly engulfing its target and erasing its very existence in a blinding burst of glory. The light suffused not only the room, but their hearts as well, as seemingly pure and endless as the love afforded to man by the gods. There was no end to its brilliance; perhaps there never would be. The workings of the divine were beyond human comprehension. That which surpassed the knowledge of man was not of man and right now, Sain was a god.

“...Well, I did my thing. Any thoughts?”

Alicia, who had been watching the disintegrating Incarnation with stunned amazement, snapped out of her trance at his words. She blinked a few times at him.

“Thoughts, huh...?”

Faced with the holy knight—a hero and savior, god among men, counterpart to the dark knight and one of the strongest beings in existence—Alicia gave her most honest opinion.

“I liked your black hair better.”

Sain laughed.

“So did I.”



Epilogue

The instant they returned from the labyrinth, Sain made a beeline for his hair dye and spare cloak. Only after he was appropriately blackened from head to toe did he make his way to the headmaster's office, Melia at his side. Alicia did not accompany them, having been forced by Sain to go to the infirmary. Though he'd used his powers as a holy knight to protect her from the corruption of Chaos, their journey through the labyrinth had definitely taken the toughest toll on her. And so, out of caution, he had urged her to take some time to rest.

Upon entering his office, Sain sat down in front of the headmaster, Mort.

"A demi-holy sword?"

The headmaster nodded in response to his question.

"Demi-holy swords are weapons for which we've managed to simulate the blessing of the goddess. They're one rank inferior to holy swords that have received the actual blessing, hence the demi in the name. Even I wouldn't leave a *real* holy sword unguarded. I'm not senile. ...Not yet, at least. That's why all the holy and doom swords I've placed in the labyrinth are demis. I do have real ones, but I wouldn't dare leave those."

The moment he sat down, Sain had demanded an explanation. A fake holy sword had been placed in the labyrinth, and he wanted to know why. The sword that Alicia had discovered wasn't one created by Chaos but, rather, was a preexisting holy sword that had been corrupted and transformed. The problem was that holy swords were imbued with the blessing of the goddess, meaning there was no way that garden-variety Chaos could possibly corrupt them. The answer he had received was the existence of demi-holy swords.

"B-But, I was told in instrumentology class that both were in the labyrinth..."

"Mm. Well, to be fair, the definition of a holy sword is rather vague to begin with. In general, the term can refer to any of three things: A sword of the goddess, like the one you hold; a man-made sword that has been given a blessing; and, as I just mentioned, a demi-sword."

"I... I see... I had no idea."

"Oh ho ho. You still have much to learn of the common world."

You were right to come to this academy, for here you shall find the knowledge that you lack. Please do feel free to study to your heart's content."

Sain gave a frustrated grunt. During his days on active duty as holy knight, he'd been surrounded by Vicitaelists. To them, there was only one holy sword—the sword of the goddess that only he was allowed to wield. As a result, he'd always assumed that the term 'holy sword' referred specifically to the type of sword he held. He had to admit, the headmaster was right; he was indeed lacking in worldly knowledge.

"With that said... the fact it was just a demi-sword resulted in its corruption by Chaos. That was certainly something I didn't see coming..." said the headmaster in a more humble tone.

Sain returned a nod.

"Imbuing a weapon with imperfect holiness will instead draw Chaos to it. True holy and doom swords wouldn't have fallen to corruption. Please be more careful in the future."

"Duly noted. I'll have the others placed in the labyrinth retrieved right away."

Jenifa Royal Magic Academy was famous for having produced many generations of exceptional talent. Accordingly, many of its headmasters had also been exceptional. Mort Dartens was no exception, having made a name for himself as a talented mage long before he took on the role of headmaster. As such, he was also aware of the existence of Chaos.

"There's one thing that bugs me though," Sain noted.

"Oh? Do tell."

"There were two places where we sensed the presence of Chaos. One was in the labyrinth... and the other was at the labyrinth gate."

The headmaster raised an eyebrow but remained silent, as if gesturing for Sain to continue.

"More specifically, it wasn't so much a presence that I sensed at the labyrinth gate, but rather it was a lingering trace. There's a significant possibility that the Chaos in the labyrinth was directly placed there by someone. Someone who transported it from here through the labyrinth gate."

"In other words... You think someone in league with Chaos resides at this academy?"

"Yes. That, or such a person was here in the past."

The labyrinth gate was situated on academy grounds, placing it inside the barrier. And as the barrier only allowed entry to authorized personnel, the person who used the gate had to have been someone from the academy.

"I understand that you wish to keep your identity hidden, but if

it's at all possible—”

“Don’t worry. I’m too far in to be backing out now. I’ll do some investigating on my own time as well.”

“That would be much appreciated. I’m sorry to trouble you with this, but as a fivekind, Chaos is a rather thorny opponent for me.”

“It’s fine. Besides, my school life is important to me, and I’d rather not have it jeopardized. Worst case scenario, I might call for backup from attendants in other lands. If it comes to that, I’ll need you to help provide some cover.”

“Oh ho ho, leave it to me. ...By the way, if you could perhaps remind me... Why was it you ventured into the labyrinth again?”

“Now that, my dear headmaster, is a foolish question. Why else?” Sain flashed him a wide, toothy grin. “To obtain the symbol of a dark knight, a doom sword, of course!”

“Ah. Is that why you said you were interested in man-made holy swords?”

“Well, man-made holy swords can be reforged into doom swords, right?”

“I see. But... why bother? You can’t use doom swords anyway.”

“...Huh?”

Sain blinked a few times with a blank expression.

“As a holy knight, the power coursing through you is the polar opposite of darkness. No matter how many seals you put on, the second you touch a doom sword, you’ll just purify its darkness and it’ll end up being a regular old sword.”

“Wh-What?! W-W-Wait, are you serious?! Really?!”

“There’s only so much seals can do, you know. They can keep your power in check on a daily basis, but they can’t control a reflexive release of power. In fact... I’m pretty sure this was already attempted by one of your predecessors.”

“But... But, I...”

The gears turning in Sain’s head grinded to a halt, resulting in what could only be described as a minor mental meltdown. Speechless, his knees gave in and he fell forward onto all fours.

The headmaster regarded him with a pitiful look.

“In any case, your school life has only just begun. I’m sure there’s plenty of excitement to come, so... erm, try your best.”

The headmaster’s words of comfort fell on deaf ears, and, for quite some time, Sain could only stare wordlessly at the ground.

After leaving the headmaster’s office, Sain shambled down the hallway. At his side was Melia.

“...So, what next?” she asked.

“...To be safe, we’ll go check on Miss Gold.”

“Understood.” Melia nodded before glancing at the empty husk of her master. “Don’t start moping now. What’s the big deal? It’s just another setback. Business as usual, right?”

“...Mercilessly blunt, as always.”

Sain mulled over her words.

Business as usual, huh.

It was indeed, he decided, business as usual. As a holy knight, Sain was never going to have an easy time becoming a dark knight. They were diametrically opposed beings. To this day, he’d been repeating a constant cycle of discovery and disappointment. Time and time again, he’d find a possibility worth probing into, only to be let down in the end.

Just like Alicia.

Each wall he ran into was a painful reminder of the vast distance between him and his dream. Every cold lead was a bitter taste of despair. But it was a taste that he shared. She knew the bitterness just as well as he did.

“You’re right. I can’t afford to be moping over something like this.”

All he had to do was find another method—a new lead. No matter how many times he failed, so long as he kept looking... one day, he would find the path that led to his dream. Holding that belief close to his heart, he slapped both hands against his cheeks in an attempt to shake his negativity.

The two gradually made their way to the infirmary and, upon entering, were assaulted by the thick smell of medicines. The teacher on duty had likely stepped out as they were nowhere to be seen.

“Sain?”

Alicia was seated in the middle of three white beds. A warm breeze entered from an open window, gently brushing the golden strands of her hair. Sain lowered himself onto an adjacent chair.

“Does your body feel okay?”

“Yeah. They said there’s nothing wrong with me, and I’ll be able to return to class pretty soon.”

“Personally, I’d prefer it if you spent some more time resting.”

“No way. I’ll die of boredom.”

Sain was relieved to find her wearing her usual energetic smile. She didn’t seem to be putting up a front. Their physical and mental suffering had long passed its peak, and, after the turbulence of labyrinth exploration, a return to everyday life was necessary. He was glad they had made it back; all three of them probably shared in that sentiment.

There was a palpable relief in the air. Seeing the warm smile on Alicia’s face, Sain felt his own lips curving upward. A comfortable

silence descended on the group and, for a while, no one spoke.

The silence was eventually broken by Alicia.

“Hey, Sain. I have a question,” she asked softly, shifting her gaze from the window toward Sain. “Should I... address you as Sir?”

Sain grimaced. He knew what her question implied. Normally, the holy knight was a target of admiration for the people. The Clan of Light held them in especially high regard, going as far as to hold them up as the ideal for clansmen to strive for.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he said with a heavy sigh. “It’ll raise suspicions if people hear you. Moreover, as someone aiming to become the dark knight, the glory and esteem that comes with the power of the holy knight is unnecessary. So, please... I ask that you treat me the same as before.”

Given her experiences, he trusted that Alicia would understand. Surely, she took no pleasure in having her fire magic praised. He regarded her seriously, his expression showing no trace of levity, as he shared with her his innermost vulnerabilities. She quickly looked down at the sheets on her bed but, for a second, he was sure he had caught her beaming.

“...You know there’s no way I can treat you the same as before,” she whispered. Her fists tightened over the sheets, and her face crumpled slightly as if she was trying to work up a vast amount of courage. “After all that... After looking so cool, and believing in me, and pushing me forward... And on top of that, scarring me with your mark... How can you possibly expect me to see you in the same way?”

The tone of her voice danced between nervousness and joy, cracking at times and trembling at others. She pushed her hands forward, using them to support her weight as she leaned toward him. The last thing he noticed was the redness of her cheeks before something soft pressed against his own. A sweet aroma passed through his nose, and everything in his vision blurred except the sight of Alicia’s flushed face.

As his brain struggled to process what had just happened, she beamed at him with all the brightness of the sun.

“You’d better take responsibility for this,” she said with an embarrassed smile.

But, as he sat beside her with his mouth agape, Sain could offer her little more than a dumbfounded stare.

Afterword

Ten percent. The significance of this value cannot be understated.

Did you think I was talking about the consumption tax? I wasn't.

This is the percentage of people who read the afterword before they buy a book. In other words, for every ten people who step into a bookstore and think about buying a book, one of them will base their decision on the contents of the afterword.

What a close call.

Who'd have known afterwords were that important?

It was my friend who told me about this. Thanks to him, I am currently devoting a very serious effort toward writing this afterword. Had he not told me, the afterword in this book probably wouldn't have been more than five lines.

Just kidding—I'd always intended to write it seriously. The friend I mentioned I actually made up just now.

Now, with that out of the way, allow me to introduce myself. I am Yusaku Sakaishi.

This work had the honor of being awarded the Gold Prize in the 12th HJ Bunko Contest. This idea came about when I crossed my very crude analysis of "there sure are a lot of stories these days where the protagonist starts off super strong" with my personal taste of "I prefer to have my protagonists remain humble and always try their best," resulting in a story about "a protagonist who is super strong but doesn't become intoxicated with power and still works hard." I'd be spoiling the story if I said any more, so if you're one of the ten percent, this would be a great time to flip the book over and read from the beginning.

After it was decided that this work would receive a prize, I worked with my assigned editor to brush it up and improve its quality. During every meeting, I was reminded of just how much fun it is to be a novelist. I'm truly glad that during my university years I aspired to become a novelist and spent my time quietly writing novels.

I'm not sure if it's because I'm having too much fun working, but recently, I've started hearing things.

This happened on a day when I woke up and had some ramen (with extra everything) at a certain place known for its large portions.

As I chewed on the thick, gummy noodles, I thought to myself, “Once I eat this, I’m going to go home and work.” However, once I returned home, my stomach suddenly revolted. With the deadline looming, I had no choice but to work while doing battle with my painful stomach. As I worked, my consciousness faded in and out, and before I knew it, I was talking with someone.

“How’s the stomach pain?”

“It’s real bad. Please help. We’re prize buddies, aren’t we? Don’t leave me hanging...”

“Yeah, but you’re almost done, right? It’s just a little more, so let’s keep going until you reach the end. As a reward of sorts, how about we go for a drink sometime later? We’ll get the gang together again.”

“Hey, that sounds good. I’m feeling like I can do this now.”

Then, I suddenly came to. Who was I talking to?

Like I mentioned in my author profile, this work was the only winning submission in the 12th HJ Bunko Contest. I was the only one to receive a prize. In other words, I had no prize buddies. So, apparently, I decided to invent one.

I figure it had something to do with me reading Twitter while I worked. I don’t remember very clearly, but someone might have tweeted something about prize buddies. When I told my friend about this, he had a good laugh at my expense.

This friend, at least, isn’t imaginary.

Or so I believe.

Special Thanks

During the writing of this work, I received a great deal of assistance from the editorial department, proofreaders, and many others. My editor also provided me with much advice regarding not just the story itself, but also the work of a writer in general. I am deeply grateful to each and every person who contributed their talents. Thank you very much to Heiro for bringing Sain and his friends to life with such vivid artwork. Finally, to everyone who took this book in your hands, you have my endless gratitude.

Bonus Short Stories

How Sain Became a Sheep

This happened a few days before Sain set out for Jenifa Royal Magic Academy.

He was still at home in the Forth family's house. A traveling merchant had arrived, requesting Sain's help as the holy knight.

"Please, sir. Please use your powers as the holy knight to purify this creepy book."

The merchant placed a book on the table in the guest room.

"This book has apparently been affected by some sort of dark magic that makes bad things happen to the holder. On top of that, whenever I try to throw the thing away, it just appears back in my hand the next morning. It's just the creepiest thing. Thanks to it, I've been running into bandits, getting scammed, and all-around just having a terrible time. Please, sir. Help me."

"This book has indeed been touched by some dark magic... Tell me something: How did you come by this book? Did you get it from another continent? I can't seem to read the title..."

"You're absolutely correct. I came by this book when I was in another continent. The title says, 'An Introduction to Summoning Demons.'"

"...Oh? Summoning demons, you say?"

Something flashed in Sain's eyes. He might have just happened upon a pearl of a book.

"Very well. I'll help you with this. By the way... What are you, uh, planning to do with this book once it's been purified?"

"I don't want to touch a terrible book like this ever again, even if it is purified. If possible, I'd like to ask you to get rid of it for me—"

"Yes! Yessss! All right! In that case, you can leave it with me!" Sain yelled, pumping his fist in excitement.

The gesture earned him a wide-eyed stare from the traveler.

"Oh, and, uh..." Sain spun back toward the book. "Can you also translate what it says on those pages about demon summoning for me?"

"Well... I certainly can, but why?"

"I... I need to know! For the purification! It's very important."

"I-I see! Understood!"

After abusing his status as the holy knight to feign credibility, Sain

purified the book and bid the traveler farewell. Then, he immediately attempted the demon summoning ritual. According to the traveler's translation, by keeping a sheep nearby as a sacrifice and reciting a certain incantation, a demon could be summoned.

So, he went outside and flipped the book open in front of one of the sheep they kept in the yard.

"Onnulu bamessa, bandelu holudelu, namanu minumenomaa...!"

The eerie syllables, further accentuated by Sain's extra ominous tone, echoed through the Forths' yard. As soon as the final word passed his lips, his whole body began glowing purple.

Mm-hm-hm. I've done it. With this, a great demon shall be summoned before me— Hm? That's weird. How come I'm the one glowing purple and not the sheep?

He began glowing brighter and brighter to the point where he was forced to close his eyes. When he opened them again, he noticed that his perspective had changed—literally. The sheep that he'd been looking down at was, for some reason, now at eye level. Feeling that something had gone wrong, he slowly shifted his gaze toward his own body. It was then that he realized...

What?! I've turned into a sheep?!

It made no sense. Why in the world was he currently wrapped in an adorable coat of wooly goodness?

"Master Sain? Where'd you run off to? It's time for lunch."

His personal attendant, Melia, came outside and toddled over. She stood over him, looking around. He desperately wiggled his stubby little legs, trying to catch her attention. She didn't even glance in his direction.

Eventually, she noticed his clothes on the ground.

"Hm, clothes? Let's see... Yep, these are Master Sain's, which can only mean... Oh, please don't tell me he's running around stark naked..."

Of course I'm not!

As Melia's expression grew grimmer and grimmer, Sain continued to *baa* his frustration, but to no avail.

An hour later, Sain reappeared in front of Melia.

Sans clothes, of course.

The Morning of a Personal Attendant Begins Early

This happened the morning after Sain arrived at Jenifa Royal Magic Academy.

Sain's personal attendant, Melia, woke up in her dormitory room. She promptly slipped out of bed and washed her face at the sink, after which she threw open the curtains and looked out at the pale morning

sky. With sunlight streaming into the room, she donned her attendant uniform with practiced deftness.

She let out a soft sigh. The next order of business was making Sain's breakfast. Then, she had to go through her list of duties and—

That was when she realized she was no longer in the Forth household. This was the academy's dormitory.

"...Well, would you look at that. Silly me."

There was no need to cook breakfast because they'd decided that they'd eat in the school cafeteria. There was no need to go through her usual list of duties because they'd decided that they were going to center their lifestyle around the school. Therefore, there was also no need for her to get up this early.

She considered getting some more sleep, but undressing and dressing again seemed like a pain. Figuring she'd just stay awake, Melia spent a long while doing nothing in particular. She simply stared at the sky.

"I feel sort of... antsy."

Normally, she'd already be rushing to and fro, doing all sorts of work for Sain. Now, with her usual rhythm broken, she couldn't help but feel restless.

Should she prepare lunch? No, lunch was also going to be cafeteria food.

Should she go and wait in front of Sain's room? No, it was far too early for that.

After mulling over her options, she decided to leave her room. She walked down the hallway to the adjacent room. She stopped in front of the door for a moment, then opened it and stepped in.

The adjacent room belonged to Sain, but she'd secretly asked the headmaster to give her a duplicate key.

"An attendant's duties include periodically checking on her master, after all."

With a lot of time on her hands and nothing to do with it, she decided to stand over Sain and watch him sleep.

"...He sure is quiet when he's sleeping."

Despite the fact that there was a person standing within arm's reach, Sain continued to snooze peacefully. As Melia watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest and the tranquil expression on his face, she found that her restlessness had faded away, replaced by a matching placidity. The next thing she knew, she'd leaned over, and her face was inches from his.

Just then, one of the drawers beside the bed suddenly flashed, and a book appeared from inside. It flipped open by itself, and large words appeared across its outspread pages.

I'm watching you.

“...”

After a long silence, Melia responded with a *tsk*.

What a possessive goddess. It seemed like she intended to keep Sain all to herself, even when he was sleeping.

Melia reluctantly backed away from Sain. The book then snapped shut. Apparently, watching him sleep was fair game. So, Melia continued to watch. She remained in his room, quietly keeping him company until he began to stir.

Just before he woke up, she silently stepped out of his room and waited by the door.

After a noisy ruckus, he appeared before her in his jet-black outfit.

“Good morning, Master Sain.”

The Golden Princess is Raring to Go

This happened when Alicia Remia was in her sixth year of the Jenifa Royal Magic Academy’s primary division.

“Wow... What a mess,” Alicia muttered as she surveyed the scene.

In order to prevent nefarious individuals from getting in, Jenifa Royal Magic Academy was under the constant protection of a powerful barrier. There was, however, occasionally the rare intruder who was powerful enough to breach the barrier and gain entrance.

As it happened, this very thing had occurred a few days ago. Fortunately, the teachers had noticed right away and apprehended the intruder, but not before engaging in an intense battle. The corner of the schoolyard where Alicia currently stood was where they had crossed swords; the shrubbery was in ruins, and what little remained of the grass was patchy and uneven.

“Hey, what’s this? Are you scared, Alicia?”

“N-No, I’m not!”

Her classmate, Cisca, walked up beside her and smirked.

It was currently lunch break. At Alicia’s urging, they had both finished their lunches early so that they could come and survey the scene. Her reasoning was that it’d remind them to stay on their toes.

“You know, Cisca, I sometimes think that, someday, there’ll be a time when the students will have to fight too.”

“You mean against intruders?”

“Yeah. This time, we were lucky that the teachers got here fast enough, but there’s no guarantee that’ll happen every time, right? That’s why I think we students need to be ready to fight as well.”

“Fight, huh. How do you plan to do that with those lukewarm flames of yours?”

“Don’t call them lukewarm! I... I can at least scare the intruders! It’ll be a distraction!”

“A distraction, huh... Look, this isn’t all fun and games. You should keep your head out of serious stuff like this.”

“Wh-What do you mean ‘fun and games’?! Fine! I’ll show you I can handle serious stuff! Just watch me!”

“Uh, I wasn’t talking about you. I just meant there’s no need for students to get involved in something so dangerous...”

“You’d better not look away, because I’m going to take down that intruder so fast!”

Alas, Alicia was raring for a fight, and Cisca’s words had failed to reach her.

A year later, on the school grounds, Alicia ran into a mysterious man clad in all black. Her conversation with Cisca immediately resurfaced in her mind, and the fading embers in her heart were reignited into a passionate blaze.

She was ready to prove herself, and the man before her was the intruder she had been hoping for—she was sure of it.

“Flagus!”

“Wait, I didn’t—”

A bolt of fire shot from her hand, forcibly ending his monologue.



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The Holy Knight's Dark Road: Volume 1
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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby
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English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2019